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The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding

M. Z. Rosaldo

This is an article about questions. Feminists have managed, in recent years, to impress a matter of undeniable importance on both academic and popular audiences alike. Previously blinded by bias, we have begun a "discovery" of women and have reported a good deal of data on women's lives, needs, and interests that earlier scholars ignored. Sexist traditions have, of course, made our records uneven. Now more than ever we see just how little is known about women. And the urgency experienced by current researchers is fueled by a recognition that invaluable records of women's arts, work, and politics are irretrievably lost. Our theories are—the saying goes—only as good as our data. As was suggested in a recent review of anthropological writings on sex roles, "What is clearest in the literature reviewed is the need for further investigation. . . . What is most impressive about this literature is the overwhelming number of specific researchable questions it has produced. Hopefully the social force which inspired anthropological interest in women's status will sustain this interest through the long second stage of research fashioned to explore these hypotheses."¹

But whatever we do or do not know, my sense is that feminist thinking—in anthropology at least—faces yet a more serious problem. Many a fieldworker has spent her months in the hills with predominantly

This paper, previously known as "Thoughts on Domestic/Public," was first presented to a Rockefeller Conference on Women, Work and Family in September 1977. I am grateful to participants in that conference and, in particular, to Heidi Hartmann and Catharine Stimpson for their insightful comments. Jane Atkinson, Jane Collier, Rose Coser, Karen Mason, Judith Modell, Fred Myers, Bridget O'Laughlin, Leslie Nadelson, Sherry Ortner, Renato Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako are all thanked for their critical readings of that and later drafts.

1. Naomi Quinn, "Anthropological Studies on Women's Status," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 181–222, esp. p. 222.

female companions. These women spoke of their homes and children and husbands. They told us about men who fed, loved, or beat them; and they shared with us their experiences both of triumph and disappointment, their sense of their own strengths and powers, and the burden of their workaday chores. Female informants have told us about ties among kin and the politics surrounding marriage; they probably labeled each pot and each knife in their homes with a tale about work, obligation, and structurally significant bonds. Contrary to those anthropologists who have suggested that our problems lie in incomplete reports or, even worse, in inarticulate and "silent" female voices,² I would suggest that we hear women speak in almost all anthropological descriptions. We have, in fact, plenty of data "on women"; but when it comes to writing about them, all too few of us know what to say. What is needed, I will suggest, is not so much data as questions. The feminist discovery of women has begun to sensitize us to the ways in which gender pervades social life and experience; but the sociological significance of feminist insight is potentially a good deal deeper than anything realized as yet. What we know is constrained by interpretive frameworks which, of course, limit our thinking; what we *can* know will be determined by the kinds of questions we learn to ask.³

The Search for Origins

The significance of these all too general remarks for anthropology becomes clear when we consider the following observation. Few historians, sociologists, or social philosophers writing today feel called upon—as was common practice in the nineteenth century—to begin their tales "at the beginning" and probe the anthropological record for the origins of doctors in shamans or of, say, Catholic ritual in the cannibalism of an imagined past. Where turn-of-the-century thinkers (one thinks here of persons as diverse as Spencer, Maine, Durkheim, Engels, and Freud) considered it necessary to look at evidence from "simple" cultures as a means of understanding both the origins and the sig-

2. Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in *The Interpretation of Ritual*, ed. J. LaFontaine (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972); Shirley Ardener, *Perceiving Women* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975).

3. See Annette G. Weiner, "Sexuality among the Anthropologists and Reproduction among the Natives," unpublished manuscript (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Department of Anthropology, 1978), and "Trobriand Kinship from Another View: The Reproductive Power of Women and Men," *Man* 14, no. 2 (1979): 328–48, for probably the most articulate of anthropologists writing about the need for us to radically reconceptualize traditional perspectives on society and social structure if we are to do more than "add" data on women to what remain, in structural terms, essentially male-biased accounts. At the same time, however, her "reproductive model" strikes me as dangerously close to much of the nonrelational thinking criticized below.

nificance of contemporary social forms, most modern social scientists have rejected both their methods and their biases. Rather than probe origins, contemporary theorists will use anthropology, if at all, for the comparative insight that it offers; having decided, with good cause, to question evolutionary approaches, most would—I fear—go on to claim that data on premodern and traditional forms of social life have virtually no relevance to the understanding of contemporary society.

Yet it seems to me that quite the opposite is true of the vast majority of recent feminist writing. If anthropology has been too much ignored by most contemporary social thinkers, it has achieved a marked—though problematic—pride of place in classics like *Sexual Politics* and *The Second Sex*. Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Susan Brownmiller, Adrienne Rich, all introduce their texts with what seems to anthropologists a most old-fashioned evocation of the human record. On the assumption that preparing meals, making demands of sons, enjoying talks with women friends, or celebrating their fertility and sexual vitality will mean the same thing to women independent of their time and place, these writers catalog the customs of the past in order to decide if womankind can claim, through time, to have acquired or lost such rightful “goods” as power, self-esteem, autonomy, and status. Though these writers differ in conclusions, methods, and particulars of theoretical approach, all move from some version of Beauvoir’s question, “What is woman?” to a diagnosis of contemporary subordination and from that on to the queries: “Were things always as they are today?” and then, “When did ‘it’ start?”

Much like the nineteenth-century writers who first argued whether mother-right preceded patriarchal social forms, or whether women’s difficult primeval lot has been significantly improved in civilized society, feminists differ in their diagnoses of our prehistoric lives, their sense of suffering, of conflict, and of change. Some, like Rich, romanticize what they imagine was a better past, while others find in history an endless tale of female subjugation and male triumph. But most, I think, would find no cause to question a desire to ferret out our origins and roots. Nor would they challenge Shulamith Firestone, who, in her important book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, cites Engels to assert our need first to “examine the historic succession of events from which the antagonism has sprung in order to discover in the conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict.”⁴ Firestone suggests, in fact, that we seek out the roots of present suffering in a past which moves from history back to “primitive man” and thence to animal biology. And most recently, Linda Gordon, in her splendid account of birth control as it has related to developments in American political life,⁵ attempted in less than thirty pages to summarize

4. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 2.

5. Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975).

the history of birth control throughout the premodern world, providing her readers with a catalog of premodern practices and beliefs that is disappointing both as history and as anthropology. In a book concerned to show how birth control agitation has fit into a history of leftist politics in the modern United States (its meaning bound to changes in the nature and organization of our families and our economy), I was surprised to find that anthropology was used to universalize contemporary political demands and undermine our present sense of singularity. There is something wrong—indeed, morally disturbing—in an argument which claims that the practitioners of infanticide in the past are ultimately our predecessors in an endless and essentially unchanging fight to keep men from making claims to female bodies.

By using anthropology as precedent for modern arguments and claims, the “primitive” emerges in accounts like these as the bearer of primordial human need. Women elsewhere are, it seems, the image of ourselves undressed, and the historical specificity of their lives and of our own becomes obscured. Their strengths prove that we can be strong. But ironically, and at the same time that we fight to see ourselves as cultural beings who lead socially determined lives, the movement back in evolutionary time brings in inevitable appeal to biological givens and the determining impact of such “crude” facts as demography and technology. One gets the feeling that birth control today is available to human *choice*, while in the past women’s abilities to shape their reproductive fates were either nonexistent or constrained by such mechanical facts as a nomadic need to move, the need for helpers on the farm, or an imbalance between food supply and demography. We want to claim our sisters’ triumphs as a proof of our worth, but at the same time their oppression can be artfully dissociated from our own, because we live with choice, while they are victims of biology.

My point here is not to criticize these texts. Feminists (and I include myself) have with good reason probed the anthropological record for evidence which appears to tell us whether “human nature” is the sexist and constraining thing that many of us were taught. Anthropology is, for most of us, a monument to human possibilities and constraints, a hall of mirrors wherein what Anthony Wallace called the “anecdotal exception” seems to challenge every would-be law; while at the same time, lurking in the oddest shapes and forms, we find a still familiar picture of ourselves, a promise that, by meditating on New Guinea menstrual huts, West African female traders, ritualists, or queens, we can begin to grasp just what—in universal terms—we “really” are.

But I would like to think that anthropology is more than that. Or, rather, I would claim that anthropology asked to answer ideologies and give voice to universal human truth is ultimately an anthropology limited by the assumptions with which it first began and so unable to transcend the biases its questions presuppose. To look for origins is, in the end, to

think that what we are today is something other than the product of our history and our present social world, and, more particularly, that our gender systems are primordial, transhistorical, and essentially unchanging in their roots. Quests for origins sustain (since they are predicated upon) a discourse cast in universal terms; and universalism permits us all too quickly to assume—for everyone but ourselves perhaps—the *sociological* significance of what individual people *do* or, even worse, of what, in biological terms, they are.⁶

Stated otherwise, our search for origins reveals a faith in ultimate and essential truths, a faith sustained in part by cross-cultural evidence of widespread sexual inequality. But an analysis which assumes that sexual asymmetry is the first subject we should attempt to question or explain tends almost inevitably to reproduce the biases of the male social science to which it is, quite reasonably, opposed. These biases have their bases in a pervasive, individualistic school of thought that holds that social forms proceed from what particular persons need or do, activities which—where gender is concerned—are seen to follow from the “givens” of our reproductive physiology. And so, for feminists and traditionalists alike, there is a tendency to think of gender as, above all else, the creation of biologically based differences which oppose women and men, instead of as the product of social relationships in concrete (and changeable) societies.

The Problem of Universals

It would be nice to overthrow convention at this point and find myself entitled to proclaim that anthropological fact definitively belies sexist assumptions. Were anthropological evidence available that denied the universal place of gender in the organization of human social life, the association of women with reproduction and care for infant young, or the relevance of women's reproductive role to the construction of women's public status, much of the difficulty in what I have to say could be avoided. More narrowly, could I cite a single instance of a truly matriarchal—or, for that matter, sexually egalitarian—social form, I could go on to claim that all appeals to universal “nature” in explaining women's place are, simply, wrong. But instead, I must begin by making clear that, unlike many anthropologists who argue for the privileged place of women here or there, my reading of the anthropological record leads me to conclude that human cultural and social forms have always been male dominated. By this, I mean not that men rule by right or even that men rule at all and certainly not that women everywhere are passive

6. N. C. Mathieu, “Homme—Culture, Femme—Nature?” *L'Homme* 13, no. 3 (1973): 101-13.

victims of a world that men define. Rather, I would point to a collection of related facts which seem to argue that in all known human groups—and no matter the prerogatives that women may in fact enjoy—the vast majority of opportunities for public influence and prestige, the ability to forge relationships, determine enmities, speak up in public, use or forswear the use of force are all recognized as men's privilege and right.⁷

But I have moved, intentionally, too fast. In order to evaluate the conclusion just put forth, it seems important first to pause and ask what, substantively, has been claimed. Male dominance, though apparently universal, does not in actual behavioral terms assume a universal content or a universal shape. On the contrary, women typically have power and influence in political and economic life, display autonomy from men in their pursuits, and rarely find themselves confronted or constrained by what might seem the brute fact of male strength. For every case in which we see women confined, by powerful men or by the responsibilities of child care and the home, one can cite others which display female capacities to fight back, speak out in public, perform physically demanding tasks, and even to subordinate the needs of infant children (in their homes or on their backs) to their desires for travel, labor, politics, love, or trade. For every cultural belief in female weakness, irrationality, or polluting menstrual blood, one can discover others which suggest the tenuousness of male claims and celebrate women for their productive roles, their sexuality or purity, their fertility or perhaps maternal strength. Male dominance, in short, does not inhere in any isolated and measurable set of omnipresent facts. Rather, it seems to be an aspect of the organization of collective life, a patterning of expectations and beliefs which gives rise to imbalance in the ways people interpret, evaluate, and respond to particular forms of male and female action. We see it not in physical constraints on things that men or women can or cannot do but, rather, in the ways they think about their lives, the kinds of opportunities they enjoy, and in their ways of making claims.

Male dominance is evidenced, I believe, when we observe that women almost everywhere have daily responsibilities to feed and care for children, spouse, and kin, while men's economic obligations tend to be less regular and more bound up with extrafamilial sorts of ties; certainly, men's work within the home is not likely to be sanctioned by a spouse's use of force. Even in those groups in which the use of physical violence is avoided, a man can say, "She is a good wife, I don't have to beat her," whereas no woman evokes violent threats when speaking of her husband's work. Women will, in many societies, discover lovers and enforce their will to marry as they choose, but, again, we find in almost every case that the formal initiation and arrangement of permanent

7. See Louise Lamphere, "Review Essay: Anthropology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1977): 612–27.

heterosexual bonds is something organized by men. Women may have ritual powers of considerable significance to themselves as well as men, but women never dominate in rites requiring the participation of the community as a whole. And even though men everywhere are apt to listen to and be influenced by their wives, I know of no case where men are required to serve as an obligatory audience to female ritual or political performance. Finally, women often form organizations of real and recognized political and economic strength; at times they rule as queens, acquire followings of men, beat husbands who prefer strange women to their wives, or perhaps enjoy a sacred status in their role as mothers. But, again, I know of no political system in which women individually or as a group are expected to hold more offices or have more political clout than their male counterparts.

Thus, while women in every human group will have forms of influence and ways of pursuing culturally acknowledged goals, it seems beside the point to argue—as many anthropologists in fact have—that observations such as mine are relatively trivial from the woman's point of view or that male claims are often balanced by some equally important set of female strengths.⁸ Some women, certainly, are strong. But at the same time that women often happily and successfully pursue their ends, and manage quite significantly to constrain men in the process, it seems to me quite clear that women's goals themselves are shaped by social systems which deny them ready access to the social privilege, authority, and esteem enjoyed by a majority of men.

Admittedly, we are dealing with a very problematic sort of universal fact. Every social system uses facts of biological sex to organize and explain the roles and opportunities men and women may enjoy, just as all known human social groups appeal to biologically based ties in the construction of "familial" groups and kinship bonds. And much as "marriage," "family," and "kinship" have, for anthropologists, been troubling but, it seems, quite unavoidable universal terms, so I would claim the same thing holds for something like "male dominance." Sexual asymmetry, much like kinship, seems to exist everywhere, yet not without perpetual challenge or almost infinite variation in its contents and its forms. In short, if the universalizing questions are the ones with which we start, the anthropological record seems to feed our fear that sexual asymmetry is (again, like kinship, and the two, of course, are linked) a deep, primordial sort of truth, in some way bound to functional re-

8. See Elsie B. Begler, "Sex, Status and Authority in Egalitarian Society," *American Anthropologist* 80, no. 3 (1978): 571-88; or Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, Barbara Sykes, and Elizabeth Weatherford, "Aboriginal Women: Male and Female Anthropological Perspectives," in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), for reasonable attempts to tilt the balance. A juxtaposition of these two articles—which come to radically opposed characterizations of women's lot in Australian aboriginal societies—is informative for what it says about the difficulty of deciding what is, ultimately, an evaluative argument in empirical terms.

quirements associated with our sexual physiology. Though various, our gender systems *do* appear more basic than our ways of organizing our economies, religious faiths, or courts of law. And so, at much the same time that the evidence of behavioral variation suggests that gender is less a product of our bodies than of social forms and modes of thought, it seems quite difficult to believe that sexual inequalities are not rooted in the dictates of a natural order. Minimally, it would appear that certain biological facts—women's role in reproduction and, perhaps, male strength—have operated in a nonnecessary but universal way to shape and reproduce male dominance.

Domestic/Public as Explanation

A common feminist response to the facts that I have outlined here has been, essentially, to deny their weight and argue that the evidence we have itself reflects male bias. By focusing on women's lives, researchers have begun to reinterpret more conventional accounts and school us to be sensitive to female values, goals, and strengths. If formal authority is not something women enjoy, so, this research claims, we ought to learn to understand informal female powers; if women operate in "domestic" or "familial" spheres, then we must focus our attention on arenas like these, wherein women can make claims.⁹ The value of scholarship of this sort is that it shows that when we measure women against men we fail to grasp important structural facts which may, in fact, give rise to female power. But while this point is an important one—to which I will return—the tendency to ignore imbalances in order to permit a grasp of women's lives has led too many scholars to forget that men and women ultimately live together in the world and, so, that we will never understand the lives that women lead without relating them to men. Ignoring sexual asymmetry strikes me as an essentially romantic move, which only blinds us to the sorts of facts we must attempt to understand and change.

An alternative approach,¹⁰ elaborated in a set of essays by Cho-

9. See, e.g., Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society," *American Ethnologist* 2 (1975): 727–56; Yolanda Murphy and Robert Murphy, *Women of the Forest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).

10. There is a third alternative, which situates itself somewhere between the two extremes cited here, namely, that of stressing variation and trying to characterize the factors that make for more or less "male dominance" or "female status." Karen Sacks ("Engels Revisited," in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974]) and Peggy Sanday ("Women's Status in the Public Domain," in *ibid.*) provide examples, though it is interesting to note that while forswearing universalism both in fact make use of an analytical separation between domestic and public in organizing their variables. Martin King Whyte, in *The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), argues (most co-

dorow, Ortner, and myself,¹¹ has been to argue that even universal facts are not reducible to biology. Our essays tried to show how what appears a "natural" fact must yet be understood in social terms—a by-product, as it were, of nonnecessary institutional arrangements that could be addressed through political struggle and, with effort, undermined. Our argument was, in essence, that in all human societies sexual asymmetry might be seen to correspond to a rough institutional division between domestic and public spheres of activity, the one built around reproduction, affective, and familial bonds, and particularly constraining to women; the other, providing for collectivity, jural order, and social cooperation, organized primarily by men. The domestic/public division as it appeared in any given society was not a necessary, but an "intelligible," product of the mutual accommodation of human history and human biology; although human societies have differed, all reflected in their organization a characteristic accommodation to the fact that women bear children and lactate and, because of this, find themselves readily designated as "mothers," who nurture and care for the young.

From these observations, we argued, one could then trace the roots of a pervasive gender inequality: Given an empirical division between domestic and public spheres of activity, a number of factors would interact to enhance both the cultural evaluations and social power and authority available to men. First, it appeared that the psychological effects of being raised by a woman would produce very different emotional dispositions in adults of both sexes; because of the diverging nature of preoedipal ties with *their* mothers, young girls would grow up to be nurturant "mothers" and boys would achieve an identity that denigrates and rejects women's roles.¹² In cultural terms, a domestic/public division corresponded to Ortner's discussion of "natural" versus "cultural" valuations,¹³ wherein such factors as a woman's involvement with young and

gently, I think) that only by studying variation will we begin to understand any of the processes relevant to the formation or reproduction of sexual inequalities, and therefore that methodological and political wisdom both require us to disaggregate summary characterizations concerning sexual status into their component parts. I agree with him and, further, was pleased to see that his empirical study led toward the recognition that it is virtually impossible to "rank" societies in terms of women's place. His conclusions agree with mine in that he comes to see more promise in a comparative approach that looks for social structural *configurations* than one concerned with summary evaluations. Because he is able to show that particular variables mean different things in different social contexts, his results call into question all attempts to talk, cross culturally, about the components of women's status or their ever-present causes.

11. Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality"; Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"; and Michelle Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in Rosaldo and Lamphere.

12. Nancy Chodorow, "Being and Doing," in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. V. Gornick and B. K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971); and Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality."

13. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"

disorderly children would tend to give her the appearance of less composure, and, therefore, of less "culture" than men. Finally, sociologically, the views prevalent in our analytical tradition (and at least as old as Plato) that public activities are valued, that authority involves group recognition, and that consciousness and personality are apt to develop most fully through a stance of civic responsibility and an orientation to the collective whole—all argued that men's ability to engage in public activities would give them privileged access to such resources, persons, and symbols as would sustain their claims to precedence, grant them power and disproportionate rewards.

Whatever its difficulties, the account, as it stands, seems suggestive. Certainly, one can find in all human societies some sort of hierarchy of mutually embedded units. Although varying in structure, function, and societal significance, "domestic groups" which incorporate women and infant children, aspects of child care, commensality, and the preparation of food can always be identified as segments of a larger, overarching social whole. While we know that men are often centrally involved in domestic life and women will, at times, range far beyond it, one can, I think, assert that women, unlike men, lead lives that they themselves construe with reference to responsibilities of a recognizably domestic kind.

Thus, even such apparently "egalitarian" and communally oriented peoples as the Mbuti Pygmy gatherer-hunters of southern Africa require that women sleep in individual huts with infant children.¹⁴ And women hide with children in these huts while men collectively enjoin the blessings and support of their forest god. Mbuti women do have a role in men's religious rites, but only to observe and then disrupt them. As if defined by their domestic and individual concerns, these women are entitled only to break up the sacred fire which joins all Pygmies to men's god; their power does not permit them to light the fires that soothe the forest and give collective shape to social bonds.

Examples like this are not hard to find, nor would they seem to pose real difficulties of interpretation. The evidence of peasant societies abounds with celebrated public men who are constrained by "honor" to defend their families' claims to "face," while the women seem to lack authority beyond the households where they live. But although denigrated in public "myth," these women "in reality" may use the powers of their "sphere" in order to attain considerable influence and control.¹⁵ Domestic women in such peasant groups have powers which the analyst can hardly minimize or dismiss, and yet they are constrained in spatial range and lack the cultural recognition associated with male activities in the public realm.

14. Colin M. Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

15. Louise Sweet, ed., "Appearance and Reality: Status and Roles of Women in Mediterranean Societies," *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 40 (1967); and Rogers (n. 9).

In short, domestic/public as a general account seems to fit well with some of what we know of sex-linked action systems and of cultural rationales for male prestige, suggesting how "brute" biological facts have everywhere been shaped by social logics. Reproduction and lactation have provided a functional basis for the definition of a domestic sphere, and sexual asymmetry appears as its intelligible, though nonnecessary, consequence. Much as, in very simple human groups, the constraints of pregnancy and child care seem easily related to women's exclusion from big-game hunting—and thus from the prestige which comes of bringing in a product requiring extrahousehold distribution¹⁶—so, in more general terms, domestic obligations and demands appear to help us understand why women everywhere are limited in their access to prestigious male pursuits. Finally, our sense of sexual hierarchy as a deep and primary sort of truth appears compatible with a theory that asserts that mother-child bonds have lasting social and psychological ramifications; sociological constraints appear consistent with psychological orientations that arise through female-dominated patterns of child care.¹⁷

As should be clear by now, I find much that is compelling in this universalist account; but at the same time I am troubled by some of what appear to be its analytical consequences. In probing universal questions, domestic/public is as telling as any explanation yet put forth. Certainly, it seems more than reasonable to assume that marriage and reproduction shape the organization of domestic spheres and link them to more public institutional forms in ways that are particularly consequential for the shape of women's lives. Specifically, if women care for children and child care takes place within the home, and, furthermore, if political life, by definition, extends beyond it, then domestic/public seems to capture in a rough, but telling, set of terms the determinants of women's secondary place in all human societies.

But if this account "makes sense" in universal terms, I would go on to claim that when we turn to concrete cases, a model based upon the opposition of two spheres assumes—where it should rather help illuminate and explain—too much about how gender really works. Just as "kinship systems" vary far too widely to be viewed as mere reflections of established biological constraints (and anthropologists have argued endlessly as to whether kinship should be understood as something built upon the biologically "given" facts of human genealogy), so the alignments of the sexes seem at once too similar to deny a universal common base and yet too various to be understood adequately in terms of any universal cause. Pygmy women do not hide in huts because of the re-

16. Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), p. 21.

17. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Random House, 1974).

quirements of domestic life; rather, their assignment to small huts appears a consequence of their lack of power. American women may experience child care as something that confines them to the home, but I am quite sure that child care is *not* what many American households are about.¹⁸ By linking gender, and in particular female lives, to the existence of domestic spheres, we have inclined, I fear, to think we know the “core” of what quite different gender systems share, to think of sexual hierarchies primarily in functional and psychological terms, and, thus, to minimize such sociological considerations as inequality and power. We think too readily of sexual identities as primordial acquisitions, bound up with the dynamics of the home, forgetting that the “selves” children become include a sense, not just of gender, but of cultural identity and social class.

What this means ultimately is that we fail to school ourselves in all the different ways that gender figures in the organization of social groups, to learn from the concrete things that men and women do and think and from their socially determined variations. It now appears to me that woman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less a function of what, biologically, she is) but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. And the significances women assign to the activities of their lives are things that we can only grasp through an analysis of the relationships that women forge, the social contexts they (along with men) create—and within which they are defined. Gender in all human groups must, then, be understood in political and social terms, with reference not to biological constraints but instead to local and specific forms of social relationship and, in particular, of social inequality. Just as we have no apparent cause to look for physiological facts when we attempt to understand the more familiar inequalities in human social life—such things as leadership, racial prejudice, prestige, or social class—so it seems that we would do well to think of biological sex, like biological race, as an excuse rather than a cause for any sexism we observe.

18. The issue is complex. A number of recent analysts have pointed to the way in which modern American family ideology leads us to think about the roles of women as defined by a necessary association of certain functions (e.g., nurturance, altruism, “diffuse enduring solidarity”; see David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968]) with certain persons (close kin) and in particular with mothers (Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, “Women-centered Kin Networks in Urban Bilateral Kinship,” *American Ethnologist* 4, no. 2 [1977]: 207–26). R. Rapp (“Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes Towards an Understanding of Ideology,” *Science and Society* 42, no. 3 [1978]: 278–300) makes it particularly clear, however, that the ways in which this ideology of “familial bonding” maps onto groups of coresidents is problematic and varies with social class. Furthermore, Diane K. Lewis (“A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 2 [1977]: 339–61) makes the cogent point that our belief in the necessary association of women and domestic functions often blinds us to the fact that, in our society, marginalization (“domestication”) is more a consequence than a cause for lack of power.

Stated otherwise, I now believe that gender is not a unitary fact determined everywhere by the same sorts of concerns but, instead, the complex product of a variety of social forces. The most serious objections to my 1974 account have demonstrated—with good cause, I think—that “women’s status” is itself not one but many things, that various measures of women’s place do not appear to correlate among themselves, and, furthermore, that few of them appear to be consistently related to an isolable “cause.”¹⁹ The failure of attempts to rank societies in terms of “women’s place” or to explain apparent variations in the amounts of privilege women elsewhere may enjoy (in terms consistent with cross-cultural data) suggests that we have been pursuing something of a ghost—or, rather, that an investigator who asks if women’s status here or there ought to be reckoned high or low is probably conceptually misguided.

To talk of women’s status is to think about a social world in ultimately dichotomous terms, wherein “woman” is universally opposed to “man” in the same ways in all contexts. Thus, we tend repeatedly to contrast and stress presumably given differences between women and men, instead of asking how such differences are themselves created by gender relations. In so doing, we find ourselves the victims of a conceptual tradition that discovers “essence” in the natural characteristics which distinguish us from men and then declares that women’s present lot derives from what, “in essence,” women are, portraying social roles and rules as products not of action and relation in a truly human world, but of self-serving individuals who perform by rote.

The Victorian Precedent

The notion that all human societies can be analyzed in terms of opposed domestic and public spheres—and that this opposition fits, in some way, with the social fact of male dominance—is not limited to feminist researchers. Indeed, one finds it more or less explicitly elaborated in a good deal of traditional social scientific thought. The turn-of-the-century social theorists whose writings are the basis of most modern social thinking tended without exception to assume that women’s place was in the home. In fact, the Victorian doctrine of separate male and female spheres was, I would suggest, quite central to their sociology.²⁰

19. These points are developed with reference to empirical data most fully in recent writings by Quinn (n. 1) and Whyte (n. 10). Whyte’s findings make it clear, in particular, that male dominance is not something that lends itself to ranking in cross-culturally significant terms (see n. 10). That this conclusion undermines *all* arguments concerning women’s status as analytically problematic—and requires that we look instead for pattern in the social structuring of gender (a conclusion very close to that of this paper)—is, however, something even Whyte has barely realized.

20. Of course, the correlated oppositions, male/female, public/domestic, do not begin with the Victorian era; one finds them more or less explicitly elaborated in political philos-

Some of these thinkers recognized that modern women suffered from their association with domestic life, but none questioned the pervasiveness (or necessity) of a split between the family and society. Most never bothered to ask just why two spheres exist; rather, all assumed their fundamental differences in sociological and moral terms and linked these to their views of the normal roles of men and women in human societies.

Most obviously, perhaps, Herbert Spencer, commonly cited as the founder both of "functionalist" and "evolutionary" social thought, disparaged feminist claims to political liberties and rights by arguing that women's "natural" place within the home proves a necessary complement to the more competitive world of men. And while some of his contemporaries feared that women's entry into public life would rob society of its stores of altruism and love, Spencer claimed that women's softer hearts would undermine all shows of selfish interest in the public world, therefore inhibiting the realization (through competition) of new forms of social excellence and strength.²¹ The socialist Friedrich Engels never argued that women should, by nature, stay within the home, but he—like Spencer—tended to assume that women never were engaged in public action or in socially productive work and, correspondingly, that women everywhere had been concerned primarily with the activities dictated by a maternal role.²² Similarly, Georg Simmel and Émile Durkheim, both acutely conscious of feminine oppression within familial

ophy since the time of the Greeks (Nannerl Keohane, "Female Citizenship: The Monstrous Regiment of Women," a paper presented at the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, April 1979). My stress on the Victorians derives, first of all, from a conviction that they are our most relevant predecessors in this regard, and, second, from an intuition that the Victorian dichotomies—in their appeal to maternity and biology—were, in fact, significantly different from those that came before. Once it is realized that domestic/public constitutes an ideological rather than an objective and necessary set of terms, we can, of course, begin to explore the differences in formulations which may appear initially to be "more of the same."

21. Herbert Spencer's assumptions about women run throughout volume 1, *Domestic Institutions*, of his multivolume *Principles of Sociology* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1893), in which the wedding of these simple assumptions to biology and nascent functionalism is clear. John Haller and Robin Haller (*The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974]) provide a rather devastating statement of some of the historical implications of Spencerian misogyny, and the relationship of sexist attitudes to his general theory is explored as well in Elizabeth Fee ("The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology," in *Chloë's Consciousness Raised*, ed. M. Hartman and L. C. Banner [New York: Harper & Row, 1974]). My own reading of Spencer is, if anything, a bit more sympathetic: Of Victorian evolutionists, he paid some of the closest attention to available anthropological data, and his sexist assumptions emerge, in only slightly less offensive form, in much of his contemporaries' work.

22. For useful critical readings of Friedrich Engels's now classic *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, vol. 2 [Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962]), see Sacks, "Engels Revisited" (n. 10), Ann Lane ("Women in Society: A Critique of Frederick Engels," in *Liberating Women's History*, ed. B. Carroll [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976]), and Eleanor Leacock

realms, described the sexes in terms suggesting an analysis based on complementary spheres:

Up to now the sociological position of the individual woman has certain peculiar elements. The most general of her qualities, the fact that she was a woman and as such served the functions proper to her sex, caused her to be classified with other women under one general concept. It was exactly this circumstance which removed her from the processes of group-formation in their strict sense, as well as from actual solidarity with other women. Because of her peculiar functions she was relegated to activities within the limits of her home, confined to devote herself to a single individual, and prevented from transcending the group-relations established by marriage, family, social life, and perhaps charity and religion.²³

. . . the interests of husband and wife in marriage are . . . obviously opposed. . . . It originates in the fact that the two sexes do not share equally in social life. Man is actively involved in it, while woman does little more than look on from a distance. Consequently, man is much more highly socialized than woman.²⁴

And though both of these theorists spoke in favor of women's increased role in "social" life, they thought as well that women were and would remain distinguishable from men; their woman of the future was, it seems, designed to make her mark not in the masculine sphere of politics, but—the now predictable answer came—in the more feminine arts.²⁵

Finally, the evolutionary social history with which turn-of-the-century feminists (like Gilman and Stanton), as well as more con-

("Introduction to Frederick Engels," in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [New York: International Publishers Co., 1972]). Contemporary interest in Engels's materialism and his sense of variation tends to excuse his "Victorian" biases as trivial; I would argue, by contrast, that his much quoted dictum—"According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life" (Engels, pp. 170-71)—fits squarely with the individualizing and dichotomous tradition criticized here and is, in very deep ways, problematic for a Marxist understanding of women's lives. That the banner of reproduction has been assumed by a number of neo-Marxist and Marxist-feminist social scientists (e.g., Claude Meillassoux, *Femmes, greniers et capitaux* [Paris: Françoise Maspero, Librairie, S.A., 1975]; Renate Bridenthal, "The Dialectics of Production and Reproduction in History," *Radical America* 10, no. 2 (1976): 3-11; and Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris, and Kate Young, "Conceptualizing Women," *Critique of Anthropology* 3, nos. 9 and 10 [1977]: 101-30) only underlines the difficulties we all face in conceptualizing the kinds of issues with which this paper is concerned.

23. Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1955), p. 180.

24. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), pp. 384-85.

25. *Ibid.*, and Lewis A. Coser, "Georg Simmel's Neglected Contributions to the Sociology of Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 4 (1977): 869-76.

ventional social theorists, were concerned was rooted equally in an opposition between maternal or domestic spheres and a more public world of men. Though many of these thinkers wrote of matriarchies in the past, what they meant was not that women ruled in public life but, rather, that humanity's first social forms gave women an important place because public society was not yet differentiated from domestic realms. Using data they were ill equipped to understand, these theorists assumed a time of promiscuity and incest in the past when men had no occasion to lay claim to individual women as their own and so enjoyed undifferentiated sexual freedom in a maternal home. They claimed—in imagery that still abounds in psychological accounts of individual growth—that social evolution waited on male efforts to compete, stake private claims, and forge a differentiated and interest-governed public sphere while leaving “mother” in the more “natural” world where she belonged.

Modern thinkers have found cause to challenge many of these nineteenth-century claims, and I have scarcely given them the scrutiny they deserve. But social scientists who would now proclaim that prior cultures knew no more of incest than we know today continue in more subtle ways to reproduce the sexist imagery and assumptions we discern in nineteenth-century accounts. Victorian theory cast the sexes in dichotomous and contrastive terms, describing home and woman not primarily as they were but as they had to be, given an ideology that opposed natural, moral, and essentially unchanging private realms to the vagaries of a progressive masculine society. And, similarly, I would suggest that when modern theorists write that paternity is a variable and social fact whereas maternity is a relatively constant and unchanging one, constrained by nature;²⁶ when they contrast expressive with more instrumental roles;²⁷ or, perhaps, when they distinguish moral kinship from the bonds of selfish interest forged in economic life;²⁸ or, then again, when they describe the differences between apparently formal and informal social roles and forms of power—they are the nineteenth century's unwitting heirs. Indeed, contemporary thinkers reproduce what many recognize as outdated contrasts and conceptually misleading terms,²⁹ at least in part because we still believe that social being is derived

26. J. A. Barnes, “Genetrix: Gensor::Nature: Culture?” in *The Character of Kinship*, ed. J. Goody (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

27. Talcott Parsons, *Social Structure and Personality* (New York: Free Press, 1964); and Morris Zelditch, “Role Differentiation in the Nuclear Family,” in *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, ed. T. Parsons and R. Bales (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955).

28. Maurice Bloch, “The Long Term and the Short Term: The Economic and Political Significance of the Morality of Kinship,” in Goody.

29. That the classic Parsonian assumptions about inherently differentiated instrumental and expressive “functions” (e.g., Parsons, p. 59) in interaction may, in large part, be the product of an ideological evaluation of the activities appropriate to different (and implicitly gendered) “spheres” is suggested in Rosaldo, *Women, Culture and Society* (n.

from essences that stand outside of social process. Life in a social world that differentiates our more natural from our constructed social bonds is then interpreted in terms of stereotyped views of what in essence men and women are, views linking women to maternity and the home in opposition to what anthropologists now would call the political-jural sphere of public society.

Within the social sciences, the early twentieth century saw a rejection of earlier schools of evolutionary thought in favor of a search for functionally grounded universals. Biological families, through the researches of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, came to be seen as necessary and virtually presocial facts, born out of our most basic human needs instead of evolutionary progress.³⁰ But, casting needs as universal, anthropologists had still to think of change, and in order to account for the diversity and complexity of reported kinship forms, they found themselves required to reinstate—although in somewhat less gendered and considerably more sophisticated terms—the nineteenth-century opposition between a female sphere of family and an inherently masculine society. Kinship, anthropologists came to see, is not a natural, biological, or genealogical fact but, instead, a molding of presumed ties of blood in terms of jural norms and rules constructed by human societies. But at the same time that they recognized that kinship always has a public, jural

10). For a useful critique of the analytical opposition between instrumental and expressive and, more generally, of assumptions about differentiation within functionalist sociology, see Veronica Beechy, "Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work," in *Feminism and Materialism*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Ann-Marie Wolpe (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). Judith Irvine's recent critique, "Formality and Informality in Communicative Events" (*American Anthropologist* 81, no. 4 [1979]: 773–90), of the concepts of formality and informality comes from a different but relevant perspective. What is interesting for our purposes is that she shows at once that the empirical referents of the formal/informal distinction are problematic at best and, further (as with domestic/public), that the intuitive appeal of this distinction is rooted in the way it promises to connect aspects of social "function" with observed interactional "styles." This functional linkage is then called into question.

30. My characterization here follows closely on Meyer Fortes (*Kinship and the Social Order* [Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969]), who points out that a commitment to "the familial origins of . . . kinship systems" (p. 49) was important to Malinowski, whose *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963) was specifically intended as an argument for universals, and to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown ("The Social Organization of Australian Tribes," *Oceania* 1 [1930]: 34–63, 206–46, 322–41, 426–56), who assumed a familial, or genealogical, "core" to kinship, although Radcliffe-Brown himself was interested in more variable jural realms. The Australian aborigines have for a long time enjoyed the questionable status of "prototypical primitive" (they figure centrally, e.g., in Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*), and so the "discovery" that they too have "families" was crucial for universalist thought. Fortes is concerned to dissociate himself from genealogism but not absolutely: "I regard the political jural aspect as complementary to the familial aspect of kinship relations" (p. 73): in a world of two spheres, nature and culture remain of equal analytical status, complementary and distinct.

sense, they still insisted that the various and political uses of kinship to articulate bonds of lineage, clan, or caste were to be distinguished from a more universal kinship essence, with, of course, a bit of nature—most particularly a family, genealogy, or maternal grouping—at its source.³¹

In its most fully articulated contemporary form, domestic and jural-political now contrast in terms of normative premises that divide those inner realms defined by the prescriptive altruism we think belongs within the home from the outer spheres subjected to external rule by contract, law, and force.³² And though most writers now would claim that this division carries no assumptions about sex, their actual characterizations of the opposed spheres in fact reflect stereotyped nineteenth-century views of necessary sexual dichotomy. Thus, domestic spheres are not defined as women's nor are women seen as necessarily limited to the home; but most theorizing about domestic spheres presumes first of all their normative opposition to (male) jural realms and, second, their basis in the universal, and inherently altruistic, bonds associated with the mother-infant dyad.³³ Anthropologists have carefully distinguished the term "family" (a group of kinsfolk) from that of "household" (a space), and these, in turn, from claims concerning gender roles with reference to domestic functions.³⁴ But in actual fact, we

31. David Schneider ("What Is Kinship All About?" in *Kinship Studies in the Morgen Centennial Year*, ed. Priscilla Reining [Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1972]) discusses the genealogizing tendency in most anthropological treatments of kinship by relating it to yet another piece of our modern, dichotomizing ideology, a tendency to discriminate and see as necessarily complementary the orders of nature and of law. Sylvia Yanagisako's review of studies of family and kinship ("Family and Household: The Analysis of Domestic Groups," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8 [1979]: 161–205) traces the relationship between assumptions about genealogy and domestic spheres. The particular conundrums we confront when trying to think about apparently universal "facts" like kinship—especially once we recognize that would-be analytical terms are rooted in ideology—is discussed, from different points of view, by Andrew Strathern ("Kinship, Descent and Locality: Some New Guinea Examples," in Goody [n. 26]) and Steve Barnett and Martin Silverman (*Ideology and Everyday Life* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979]).

32. My characterization here leans heavily on Yanagisako, "Family and Household: The Analysis of Domestic Groups," which is a critical discussion of Fortes's analytical framework (see n. 30).

33. Fortes speaks, e.g., about the "matricentral cell," in his introduction to *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, ed. J. Goody (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 8, and argues that "the domestic domain is the system of social relations through which the reproductive nucleus is integrated with the environment and with the structure of the total society" (p. 9). In characterizing the familial, as opposed to the political-jural, component of meaning in kinship relations, he contrasts "the affection and trust parents and children have for one another" with the "authority of the parents and the subordination of the children" (Fortes, p. 64). My suggestion, of course, is that this contrast does not necessarily derive from actual social relationships "out there" but, rather, that its "sense" is located in a particular, Western, highly gendered ideology.

34. For one of the clearest discussions of these distinctions, see Donald R. Bender, "A Refinement of the Concept of Household: Families, Co-Residence and Domestic Func-

find that what domestic means is the locale where kinfolk share a living space and mothers do the day-by-day providing. In complementary fashion, no contemporary anthropologist would claim that the political-jural sphere is always, or exclusively, the concern of men, but available accounts of the political relationships that organize, link, and divide domestic groups assume that men shape public (and so, ultimately, private) life because they have both selfish interests and public authority.

Our analytical tradition, in short, has preserved the nineteenth-century division into inherently gendered spheres and, in doing so, has cast one presumably basic social fact not in moral or relational terms but, rather, in individualistic ones, wherein the shape of social institutions is implicitly understood as a reflection of individual needs, resources, or biology. Thus, we contrast family with political-jural realms but do not speak of "opposition" when distinguishing, for instance, the sphere of law from that of work, religious faith, or school, because we see the latter as the product of real human history and work. In contrast, home versus public life appears to have a transhistoric sense, at least in part, because it corresponds to our long-standing ideological terms contrasting inner and outer, love and interest, natural and constructed bonds, and men's and women's natural activities and styles. As we have seen, there is some cause to think that our acceptance of these dichotomous terms makes sense; but at the same time, it would now appear that understandings shaped by oppositional modes of thought have been—and will most likely prove themselves to be—inherently problematic for those of us who hope to understand the lives that women lead within human societies.³⁵

Having conceptualized the family as something other than the world, we are then led to think that things like love and altruism, gender,

tions," *American Anthropologist* 69, no. 5 (1967): 493–504; and Yanagisako, "Family and Household: The Analysis of Domestic Groups." Lila Leibowitz's recent book, *Females, Males, Families* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1978), does a first-rate job of documenting variation in structure and function in both primate and human familial groups and, in doing so, challenges all attempts to give a unitary, functionalist account of either gender roles or families. Unfortunately, she seems to forget her own best advice when she then attempts (unsuccessfully, I think) to come up with a cross-cultural definition of the family that lacks functionalist presuppositions. In addition, she diverges from my own approach in trying to account for the emergence of familial groups in a manner that casts families as the creations of individual needs, which in some sense "precede" society.

35. For a closely related statement, see Patricia Caplan and Janet M. Burge, eds., *Women United, Women Divided* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1978). There the authors argue that the problem with domestic/public as a formulation is that it fails to help us conceptualize the nature of the "articulation" among spheres, and they suggest that this articulation should be understood with reference to relations of production. See also Bridget O'Laughlin, "Production and Reproduction: Meillassoux's 'Femmes, greniers and capitaux,'" *Critique of Anthropology* 2, no. 8 (1977): 3–32, for a critique of a related set of oppositions as inherently incompatible with the study of relationships.

the organization of kinship, and the texture of familial life cannot be adequately understood in terms that we would use to analyze society as a whole. Thus, anthropologists will argue that kinship must be understood as a phenomenon in and of itself,³⁶ much as many feminists proclaim that sociology is not enough to understand sex/gender orders.³⁷ That conventional sociology (including much of Marxist social thought) is as yet ill equipped to understand the way all human social life depends upon our forms of feeling and belief is an observation that these theorists pass by.³⁸

A related point is that—not only for anthropologists but for sociologists and social historians as well—most studies of domestic groupings tend to presuppose their universal deep familial core; and so, while asking how and why domestic spheres expanded or collapsed, few analysts probe the various *contents* of familial bonds or ask how varying relationships within the home might influence relationships outside it. The fact that people elsewhere do not view domestic groupings as the closed familial groups we know, that warmth and altruism are rarely the unique prerogatives of close coresident kin—in short, that we cannot presume to know just what, in any given case, it means to be a parent, sibling, spouse, or child—are things too rarely probed because we start by thinking that we know just what the answers are. Our studies of domestic groups report their demographic flux and demonstrate how authority in public life can shape such things as residential choice and aspects of familial politics. But it remains the case that anthropological accounts, at least, have more to say about the organization of the public sphere (and so of male pursuits) than of real variations in domestic life because we think that social process works “from outside in.”³⁹ The

36. Fortes, pp. 219–49.

37. This issue runs through contemporary Marxist-feminist discussion (see, e.g., Kuhn and Wolpe, n. 29 above); for a deep and telling statement of this position (one with which I find myself in sympathy, if not agreement), see Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” in Reiter (n. 8 above); also Heidi Hartmann, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3, pt. 2 (1975): 137–69.

38. My characterization is not entirely fair, since concerns for attitudes, culture, consciousness, or, in Marxist terms, the reproduction of ideology are long-standing issues in social science. Still, one gets the feeling that feminist distress with the failure of social science to address issues of gender in the past feeds a sense that gender as a sociological issue is inherently different from other aspects of social organization with implications for personal identity, demanding some sort of nonconventional (and, usually, psychologically oriented) account. My own sense, by contrast, is that our frustration stems, first, from the failure of sociological theory to relate gender in systematic ways to other kinds of inequality and, second, from the inadequacies of a utilitarian tradition that has made it extremely difficult to conceptualize the sociological significance of human consciousness, culture, or thought.

39. Yanagisako documented this point in “Family and Household” (n. 31) with a number of ethnographic examples. Again and again she found that variation in domestic spheres is not deemed deeply interesting nor is it given the descriptive or conceptual attention associated with more public or jural realms.

contents of what we view as women's world is something all too readily conceptualized as shaped either by natural constraints or by the dynamism associated with men, their public dealings, and authority.

My point in citing precedents like these is not, however, to proclaim that people now should look inside the home; certainly many sociologists have done this. Nor do I think that in recognizing women's ties to the domestic sphere we would do well to work from inside out in trying to rethink the nature of the family or to reconceptualize women's lives. Rather, I would suggest that the typically flat and unilluminating picture of women that appears in most conventional accounts is bound up with theoretical difficulties that emerge whenever we assume that feminine or domestic spheres can be distinguished from the larger world of men because of their presumably panhuman functions. And insofar as feminists are willing to accept this kind of virtually presocial and unchanging base for women's lives, their explorations of the worlds of women will remain a mere addition—and not a fundamental challenge—to traditional ways of understanding social forms as the creation of the lives and needs of men.

The most serious deficiency of a model based upon two opposed spheres appears, in short, in its alliance with the dualisms of the past, dichotomies which teach that women must be understood not in terms of relationship—with other women and with men—but of difference and apartness.⁴⁰ “Tied down” by functions we imagine to belong to mothers and the home, our sisters are conceptualized as beings who presently *are*, and have at all times been, the same, not actors but mere subjects of male action and female biology. And feminists reveal themselves the victims of this past when their accounts attempt to focus our attention on the important things that women do, by adding variables that concern domestic roles, maternity, and reproductive life.⁴¹

The Example of Simple Societies

Feminist research began—to borrow Marx's phrase—by turning sociology “on its head” and using relatively conventional sorts of tools to forge new kinds of arguments. Much as I argued in 1974 for the importance of attention to domestic spheres in order to understand the

40. June Nash, “The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance” (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 [1978]: 349–62), and June Nash and Eleanor Leacock, “Ideologies of Sex: Archetypes and Stereotypes” (*Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 285 [1977]: 618–45) have suggested that such dualisms as nature/culture and domestic/public are rooted less in other cultures' “reality” than in our modern Western ideology. Unfortunately, their critique stops at the level of debunking Western Capitalism Bias, without, I think, formulating an alternative adequate both to our intuitions and to the problem (understanding gender) at hand.

41. Again, it seems to me that this is the inclination in a good deal of Marxist-feminist writing and research (see nn. 21, 34, and 35).

place of women in human social life, so the 1970s saw a number of essentially comparable attempts to “turn the tables” by a wide range of feminist social scientists. For some, discovering women’s world⁴² or sphere⁴³ was an analytical first step. An emphasis on informal roles⁴⁴ or muted expressive forms⁴⁵ provided a critical starting point for others. One of the most important developments in anthropology was the challenge by a number of feminist writers of a traditional account that celebrated the evolutionary first steps achieved by Man the Hunter.⁴⁶ In order to clarify my arguments above, I want to comment briefly on the process by which Woman the Gatherer came to undermine what had been Man the Hunter’s pride of place and then go on to argue that our newfound gathering women are, in fact, the direct heirs of hunting men, in that each is cast within a sexually stereotyped sphere that is—empirically—problematic and—conceptually—one more instance of our tendency to think within the individualizing and biologicistic terms that underlie Victorian dichotomies.

Briefly, the 1960s saw a flowering of anthropological interest concerning three related themes: human evolution, the nature of primate social life, and the organization of simple (and so, it was inferred, ancestral) hunter-gatherer societies. The research, overwhelmingly informed by ecological and adaptationist concerns, led on the one hand to the recognition that in most of the world’s hunting groups, women in fact supplied most of humanity’s food as gatherers and collectors of small game. But at the same time, scholars argued that it was not gathering but the hunting of large game that moved our primate ancestors over the abyss that separates humanity from the brute natural world. Hunters, it was argued, needed language—and therefore large brains—in order to communicate and plan; and in designing weapons they made further strides, providing man with his first skills in artistry and making tools.⁴⁷

42. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–30.

43. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

44. Susan Rogers, “Female Forms of Power” (n. 9); Susan Rogers, “Woman’s Place: A Critical Review of Anthropological Theory,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, no. 1 (1978): 123–62; and Beverly L. Chiñas, *The Isthmus Zapotecs: Women’s Roles in Cultural Context* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973).

45. E. Ardener (n. 2 above).

46. Sally Slocum, “Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology,” in Reiter (n. 8 above); Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman, “Women in Evolution. Part I: Innovation and Selection in Human Origins,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3, pt. 1 (1976): 585–608; and Adrienne Zihlman, “Women in Evolution. Part II: Subsistence and Social Organization among Early Hominids,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 (1978): 4–20.

47. E.g., Sherwood L. Washburn and C. S. Lancaster, “The Evolution of Hunting,” in *Man the Hunter*, ed. R. Lee and I. DeVore (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968).

Not surprisingly, the feminist response to this account began by arguing that our scholarly tradition had unduly slighted women's central place. Writings through the 1970s traced a complex set of links connecting the decline in human groups of large carnivorous pointy teeth, the emergence of opposable thumbs, the rise in skill requiring larger brains in order to coordinate eye and hand, and, finally, the fact that human females needed larger pelvises in order to accommodate and bear their large-brained young. These females, in the new account, adopted upright postures which ultimately permitted them to exploit the environment within new ways. The feminist account points out as well that human infants must be born with brains still relatively immature, requiring prolonged periods of dependency and adult care. Thus, it must have been for females a necessity, of sorts, to forge at once the social and productive skills that would permit them to provide for both dependent offspring and themselves. Furthermore, females are thought to have been concerned to find not violent but cooperative males as mates, in hopes of winning males to serve as their assistants and providers. So it was, the story goes, that females managed to create our basic social skills (like language) and our first basketry and digging tools; also—because of their concern for the infant young—they managed, through selection, to create an Adam who would understand and help.

With good reason, this new account has won considerable esteem. Using forms of argument and data that had fueled an obviously deficient and male-biased traditional account, it not only made good sense but corresponded well with what ethnographers had observed of women's action in contemporary hunting groups—in particular, their very real autonomy and self-regard. Hardly passive stay-at-homes dependent on the will of men who bring them game, women in hunter-gatherer groups appear, in general, to enjoy a life as flexible and relatively egalitarian as any yet reported.

But at the same time that *Woman the Gatherer* has, in fact, begun to set the record straight, it seems to me that this revised account is far from adequate, if what we seek is not simply an appreciation of the contribution women make but instead an understanding of how these women organized their lives and claims in any actual society. The account insists, with reason, that our gathering sisters did important things; but it cannot explain why hunting peoples never celebrated women's deeds so necessary to human survival. Indeed, if we appeal to the contemporary evidence for what it might say about the past, hunting peoples celebrate—both in all male and in collective rites—not gathering or childbirth but rather the transcendent role of hunters. *Man the Hunter* boasts about his catch, and women choose as lovers able hunters; but in no report are we informed of women celebrated for their gathering skill or granted special recognition because of their success as mothers.

Yet more serious, perhaps, *Woman the Gatherer* as presently por-

trayed is overwhelmingly a biological being whose concerns are dictated by her reproductive role. She seeks a male who will impregnate and, perhaps, provide; but she has no cause to forge—or to resist—ongoing adult bonds, or to create and use a jural order made of regular expectations, norms, and rules. If anything, Woman the Gatherer seems a being who is content unto herself; absorbed in what in fact appear as relatively domestic chores, she frees her male associates to engage in risky hunts, forge wider bonds, and so, again, she allows Man the upper hand, permitting him to make the social whole.⁴⁸ That youthful men in actual hunter-gatherer groups appear much more concerned than women both to marry and to have new offspring of their own; that women do not look either to husbands or sons for meat (but rather, through their early married years, are likely to depend on fathers, lovers, or brothers); that mother-child bonds are fragile because women urge sons to leave the natal sphere and celebrate not female fertility but sexuality; that men in almost every hunting group will say they “exchange” sisters in order to get wives; and finally, that women typically find their autonomy constrained by threats of masculine rape and violence—are systematic and recurrent features of the social life in hunter-gatherer groups that an account that dwells either on men’s or women’s roles (or starts by studying families without attending to the links between familial groups and overarching social process) cannot begin to understand.

I cannot detail here the contours of an alternative approach, but I would like to suggest briefly some possible directions. In recent research by Jane Collier and myself, we have been concerned to stress not the activities of women—or of men—alone; instead, we are attempting to convey the ways in which a sexual division of labor in all human social groups is bound up with extremely complex forms of interdependence, politics, and hierarchy.⁴⁹ In particular, we note that in most hunter-gatherer groups, women feed husbands but men do not necessarily feed their wives, nor do sexually mature unmarried men spend bachelor years displaying their potential as providers. Instead, what seems to happen is that women tend the hearth, feeding children and adult men who are associated with them as brothers, fathers, or husbands. And what this means for men is that they either eat at the hearths of women who enjoy a primary, marital tie to someone other than themselves—and

48. Amusingly (if distressingly), this view is most explicit in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), in which she argues that women, once dominant, gave the business of “building society” over to men in order to win their cooperation.

49. The research referred to is explicated in M. Rosaldo and Jane Collier’s forthcoming paper, “Sex and Politics in Simple Societies,” in *Sexual Meanings*, ed. S. Ortner and H. Whitehead (in press). In addition, Jane Collier’s recent unpublished manuscript, “Women’s Work, Marriage and Stratification in Three Nineteenth-Century Plains Tribes,” provides, I think, the fullest theoretical and descriptive explication of the perspective advocated here (available from the author, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University).

so experience their subordination to a nonwife's husband—or else they have a wife and fire of their own and so consider themselves as social adults.

A social hierarchy is thus created which ranks married over unmarried men and so makes men want to marry. And men get married not by winning maidens' hearts but, rather, by giving game and labor to the in-laws who alone can then persuade young women to assume the wifely role. Happy to win immediate gifts both of affection and of game from lovers whom they do not have to feed, most women have small cause to seek a spouse, because they rest assured of the protection and support of fathers and brothers. Women may use their sexual appeal to undermine, support, or stimulate initiatives by men. But in a world where men—and not women—have good cause to win and make claims in a spouse, only men are recognized and described as persons who actively create the deep affinal bonds that organize society. Thus, whereas men in making love make claims that stand to forge alliances—or perhaps cause conflict by disputing claims of equal men—female sexuality is seen more as a stimulant (demanding celebration) or an irritant (requiring control by rape) than as an active force in organizing social life. In fact, the reason *Man the Hunter* is so often celebrated in these groups is that young suitors give their in-laws game in order to dramatize affinal claims *and* to win their support in an endeavor to secure much-needed loyalty and services from a (quite reasonably) unwilling wife.

To speak of sexual asymmetry in these groups is not, therefore, to claim that all "men . . . exercise control,"⁵⁰ or that all women, unlike men, are apt to be excluded from the public world because of care required by young families. Children constrain women, not from speaking out, but instead from dabbling in the pleasant politics of sex. And sexual politics, much more than child care itself, appears to be the center of most of these women's lives. Services expected of women in the home make sense not as extensions of maternal chores but, rather, as concomitants of male hierarchies; and women celebrate their sexual selves because it is in terms of sexual claims that people of both sexes at once organize and challenge their enduring social bonds. In the end, the preeminence enjoyed by men in groups like these appears to have as much to do with the significance of marriage for relationships among the men themselves—relationships that make wives something to achieve—as it does with sexual opposition or a more brute male dominance. Though male threats of force may check such women as might see fit to rebel, the fact remains that women rarely seem oppressed, but at best limited, by the simple fact that they cannot enjoy the highest prize of

50. Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 31.

male political life: the status of a hunter who enjoys a wife and private hearth.

Woman the Gatherer was discovered in an attempt to clarify our accounts of “how it all began” and to challenge those accounts which presuppose a necessary and natural foundation for male dominance. But I have sketched the outlines of an alternative approach because it seemed to me that Woman the Gatherer failed (much like her more silent sisters of the past), in sociological and ethnographic terms, to help us understand just what, in simple hunter-gatherer groups, a woman’s life is all about. The problem, I suggested, lay in an attempt to understand the forms of female action and the woman’s role by asking, “What did early woman do?” and not, “What kinds of bonds and expectations shaped her life?” Assuming that brute reproductive, or productive, facts (the food they bring, the children they give life) define what women are and mean, this view casts all women, initially, as mothers. Thus, much as with domestic/public and related analytic frames, women are conceptualized as biological beings, differentiated from men, instead of as men’s partners and/or competitors in an ongoing and constraining social process.⁵¹

My alternative is to insist that sexual asymmetry is a political and social fact, much less concerned with individual resources and skills than with relationships and claims that guide the ways that people act and shape their understandings. Thus, it appears to me that if we are to grasp just what it is that women lack or men enjoy—and with what sorts of consequences—what we require are not accounts of how it all began, but theoretical perspectives, like that sketched above, which analyze the relationships of women and men as aspects of a wider social context. If men, in making marriages, appear to be the actors who create the social world, our task is neither to accept this fact as adequate in sociological terms nor to attempt, by stressing female action, to deny it. Instead, we must begin to analyze the social processes that give appearances like

51. Donna Haraway’s “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Parts I and II” (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 [1978]: 21–60) on ideology in recent primatology and evolutionary thought shows how Tanner and Zihlman, in particular, are using the analytical presuppositions of sociobiology to make a most unsociobiological argument. Haraway does not claim that this approach is wrong, but she does urge caution. My argument here develops what I take to be Haraway’s intention. In particular, I have suggested at a number of points that an approach that assumes or postulates “opposed spheres” and/or the “obvious” significance of biological reproduction (and motherhood) is wedded in fairly deep ways to the biases associated with “methodological individualism” in sociology. “Two spheres” tend, we have seen, to reflect what are taken as (biologically given) individual needs and capacities; therefore, it is only on the assumption that society is the simple product of the individuals who compose it that an analysis in terms of two spheres makes sense. Sociobiology makes this assumption. My point has been to call it into question by stressing that it is only by understanding social relationships that we will grasp the significance, in any given case, of individual capacities and constraints.

these their sense, to ask just how it comes about—in a world where people of both sexes make choices that count—that men come to be seen as the creators of collective good and the preeminent force in local politics. Finally, I would suggest, if these become the questions that guide our research, we will discover answers not in biological constraints or in a morphology of functionally differentiated spheres but, rather, in specific social facts—forms of relationship and thought—concerning inequality and hierarchy.

Conclusion

I began this paper by suggesting that the time has come for us to pause and reflect critically upon the sorts of questions feminist research has posed for anthropology. Rather than quarrel with the blatantly inaccurate accounts in texts like *Women's Evolution* or *The First Sex*, I argued that our most serious problem lies, not in the futile quest for matriarchies in the past, but in our very tendency to cast questions first in universalizing terms and to look for universal truths and origins.

It seems likely to me that sexual asymmetry can be discovered in all human social groups, just as can kinship systems, marriages, and mothers. But asking "Why?" or "How did it begin?" appears inevitably to turn our thoughts from an account of the significance of gender for the organization of all human institutional forms (and, reciprocally, of the significance of all social facts to gender) toward dichotomous assumptions that link the roles of men and women to the different things that they, as individuals, are apt to do—things which for women, in particular, are all too readily explained by the apparently primordial and unchanging facts of sexual physiology.⁵² My earlier account of sexual asymmetry in terms of the inevitable ranking of opposed domestic and public spheres is not, then, one that I am willing to reject for being wrong. Rather, I have suggested that the reasons that account made sense are to be found not in empirical detail, but in the categories, biases, and limitations of a traditionally individualistic and male-oriented sociology. In fact, I now would claim that our desire to think of women in terms of a presumed "first cause" is itself rooted in our failure to

52. My argument with biologism operates on two levels. Men and women both, of course, have bodies, and in some sense our biological nature does constrain what we can be (we cannot live under water or fly in the sky). More deeply, I would not question that there are important "interactions" between such things as hormones and behavioral dispositions, like aggression. What I do object to, first, in theoretical terms, is a tendency to think that social relationships "reflect" and ultimately are "built upon" presumed biological givens (a tendency associated with methodological individualism [see n. 48]). And second, strategically, I am disturbed that when we look to find a biological first base we tend to think of women's lives as shaped by biological "constraints," whereas the "in-born" characteristic most usually associated with men—aggression—tends to be seen, if anything, as a source of freedom and a ground for the creation of constructive social bonds.

understand adequately that the individuals who create social relationships and bonds are themselves social creations. Because we tend to think of human social forms as a reflection of the individuals who give them life, we then find cause to fear that women's social roles as presently observed are based upon what some might claim all women are: not human actors—social adults—but reproducing mothers. At much the same time, the traditional assumptions which inform a mode of thought that sees in all domestic groupings an unchanging nurturant and altruistic core—in opposition to the more contingent bonds that make for more encompassing social orders—lead us repeatedly to re-instate the things we fear by casting women's roles in particular as something other than the product of human action in concrete, historical societies.

Thus, without denying that biological facts like reproduction leave their mark on women's lives, I would insist that facts of this sort do not themselves explain or help us to describe sexual hierarchies in relation to either domestic or public life. To claim that family shapes women is, ultimately, to forget that families themselves are things that men and women actively create and that these vary with particulars of social context. And just as families (in social and cultural terms) are far more various (and less ubiquitous) than most scholars have assumed, so gender inequalities are hardly universal in their implications or their contents. The roles the sexes play contribute to and are in turn shaped by all other inequalities in their social world, be these the split between a hunting husband and dependent bachelor youth or the relationship of capitalist to worker in our own society. In every case, the shapes that gender takes—and so, the possibilities and implications of a sexual politics—are things to be interpreted in political and social terms, that speak initially of the relationships and opportunities men and women may enjoy, in order then to comprehend how they may come to be opposed in terms of interests, images, or styles.

I cannot begin here to add to the fast-growing literature on women's place in our contemporary social form. It seems relevant to my argument, however, to observe that one way gender is bound up with modern capitalist social life is that a central quality we believe that women lack, aggression, figures overwhelmingly in popular accounts of how it is that some men fail and some succeed. I do not for one moment think that hormones make for the success of businessmen or the failings of the poor, nor that they help us understand the social fact of female subordination. But what I would suggest is that in our society talk of natural aggressive and assertive drives is one way that sexism and other forms of social inequality are interlinked. It seems no accident, for instance, that the author of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* cites hormonal data in order to proclaim that women, lacking aggression, are destined never to succeed.

No reader of the ethnography on contemporary hunting groups

would claim that capitalist competitive drives are very closely tied to the quite different qualities and skills that make for a successful husband/hunter. But having recognized that inequalities in political and economic terms are, though universal, intelligible only in their locally specific forms, we must now come to understand how much the same is true of inequalities we naturalize by talking about sex. Questions of origins may find their answers in a story based on functional oppositions between spheres. But both the question and response teach us to locate women's "problem" in a domain apart—and so to leave men happily in their traditional preserve, enjoying power and creating social rules, while, of course, ignoring women in the process. So doing, they fail to help us understand how men and women both participate in and help to reproduce the institutional forms that may oppress, liberate, join, or divide them.

What traditional social scientists have failed to grasp is not that sexual asymmetries exist but that they are as fully social as the hunter's or the capitalist's role, and that they figure in the very facts, like racism and social class, that social science claims to understand. A crucial task for feminist scholars emerges, then, not as the relatively limited one of documenting pervasive sexism as a social fact—or showing how we can now hope to change or have in the past been able to survive it. Instead, it seems that we are challenged to provide new ways of linking the particulars of women's lives, activities, and goals to inequalities wherever they exist.

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