



CHICAGO JOURNALS

An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology

Author(s): Marilyn Strathern

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Reconstructing the Academy (Winter, 1987), pp. 276-292

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173986>

Accessed: 11/09/2014 02:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Signs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

AN AWKWARD RELATIONSHIP: THE CASE OF FEMINISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

MARILYN STRATHERN

Feminist scholarship offers the promise of a common ground between disciplines. Yet this very promise also raises questions about the impact of feminist theory on mainstream disciplinary development. Indeed, the one idea—the desirability of establishing autonomous women’s studies centers—invariably recalls the other—the desirability of revolutionizing mainstream establishments—a pair of propositions which encapsulates the ideational divide between autonomy and integration that gives feminist theories their political edge. The fact that feminist scholarship works across disciplines means it cannot be parallel with them, and this is awkward in relation to the idea that feminist insights might modify work in any single

This article is based on a lecture given in the series, Changing Paradigms: The Impact of Feminist Theory upon the World of Scholarship, at the Research Center for Women’s Studies, Adelaide, Australia, July 1984. I thank Susan Margarey for her invitation and hospitality, and for thus drawing my attention to the issues of paradigms. The lecture was published in *Australian Feminist Studies Journal* 1 (December 1985): 1–25. I had spoken on similar themes at the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, and at the History of Consciousness Unit, Santa Cruz, and thank colleagues at both places for their comments. Inspiration also came from the Research Group on Gender Relations in the Southwest Pacific at the Australian National University. The journal’s readers will recognize ideas of theirs, for which I am most grateful.

[Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1987, vol. 12, no. 2]
© 1987 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/87/1202-0007\$01.00

discipline, for instance, anthropology. For its impact to be registered on mainstream theorizing, feminist scholarship would have to be construed as an isomorphic sister “discipline” from which ideas and concepts could be borrowed. Any conceptualization of the relationship between feminism and anthropology must account for this awkwardness.

Much of the literature on the failure of feminist scholarship to change disciplines assumes the isomorphism of feminist studies and traditional disciplines, for it is often couched in terms of the immense task of paradigm shift. The idea that paradigms *can* be shifted suggests two things at once. The underlying assumptions that constitute disciplinary bias in its unreformed state are exposed; at the same time, displacing these with a conscious theoretical framework challenges existing theoretical frameworks. Fundamental premises are thus open to assault. Yet this idea of paradigm shift, so dear to our representations of what we do, turns out to be an inadequate description of our practice. I shall try to show why.

Disciplines are distinct both in their subject matters and in their practices. Feminist studies examine new subjects which they can offer to different disciplines: “placing women at the center, as subjects of inquiry and as active agents in the gathering of knowledge.”¹ What, then, of different practices? Practices are constituted by theoretical frameworks, by conceptual givens and assumptions, and also by the kind of relationship which an investigator establishes with the subject itself. This article explores some of the problems that disciplinary practices can put in the way of responsiveness to feminist theorizing. It focuses on the investigator’s relationship with his or her subject, a source of particularly awkward dissonance between feminist practice and the practice of the discipline I know best, social anthropology.

It is perhaps ironic to highlight a dissonance between feminism and anthropology, for anthropology is sometimes singled out for the extent to which it has been affected by feminist thinking. Certainly anthropology has interests parallel to those of feminist scholarship, but the proximation makes anthropologists’ resistance more poignant. Indeed, it may well be, as one of the *Signs* readers put it, that the dissonance is actually a product of feminists’ and anthropologists’ intellectual proximity—that they are, as the reader suggested, neighbors in tension, neighbors whose similarities provoke them to mutual mockery. I press home the point by considering the dissonance between *specific branches* of feminist and anthropological theorizing which on the surface appear congenial to one another. Rather than looking at well-established areas of anthropology, I consider an innovative approach that shares common interests with radical feminism.

¹ Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne, “The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology,” *Social Problems* 32, no. 4 (April 1985): 301–16. I am grateful to Barrie Thorne, from whom this article has profited greatly.

Practitioners of both imagine they might be overthrowing existing paradigms, and one might, in turn, expect “radical” anthropology to draw on its feminist counterpart. This does not seem to have happened. Their resistance to one another will throw light on the difference between “feminism” and “anthropology” as such.

Anthropology: Successful or unsuccessful?

The affinity between feminist and anthropological thought is central in Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne’s account of the missing feminist revolution in sociology. Anthropology, they state, joins history and literature as the fields in which the most impressive feminist conceptual shifts have occurred. The impressive gains of anthropology can be attributed to the “significant female imprint on the anthropological pavements from the discipline’s earliest days,” to the centrality of kinship and gender in traditional anthropological analysis, and to a holistic perspective that accepts gender as a pervasive principle of social organization.²

In many ways ideas generated by feminist inquiry have received a ready response in mainstream social anthropologists’ descriptions of other societies. No one any longer can talk unselfconsciously about the position of women. It is no longer possible to assume that women are to be measured by the status they hold relative to another or relegated to a chapter dealing with marriage and the family. The study of gender has become a field in its own right. Most major areas of anthropology were rapidly colonized by such ideas during the enormous growth of interest in feminism in the 1970s, creating the subdiscipline of feminist anthropology. The early questions asked by feminist anthropology—What is the place of ideology in collective representations? How do systems of inequality arise? Are analytic categories such as “domestic” and “political” useful? and, How are concepts of personhood constituted?—remain at the forefront of its concerns. Moreover, the discipline provides materials for part of the feminist enterprise, namely, the scrutiny of Western constructs. Anthropologists have investigated Western biological idioms; have stressed that what happens to women cannot be comprehended unless we look at what happens to men and women, and that what happens in that realm cannot be comprehended without attention to the overall social system; and continue to provide glimpses into other worlds, into different

² Stacey and Thorne, 303. See also Carol MacCormack, “Anthropology—a Discipline with a Legacy,” in *Men’s Studies Modified*, ed. Dale Spender (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 99–110. Judith Shapiro, however, includes anthropology in her castigation of the social sciences, which “have yet to come to terms with gender as a social fact” (“Anthropology and the Study of Gender,” in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy*, ed. E. Langland and W. Gove [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], 110–29, esp. 112).

forms of oppression and freedom. Anthropology supplies a range of cross-cultural data that, to borrow a phrase, are good to think with.

The discipline thus appears to offer an unparalleled position from which to scrutinize Western assumptions, enlarging the scope of feminist enterprise by reminding us of the conditions under which women live elsewhere. Yet, in the early 1970s, specific feminist interest entered anthropology in the form of stinging attacks on the discipline's male bias. This was a clear signal that anthropologists could not afford to be complacent. Simply having had a "place" somewhere for women in their accounts was not enough; they could well be replicating male evaluations of women in the societies they studied. This feminist critique of bias quickly found its mark. After all, feminists were asking the kinds of questions about ideologies and models that anthropologists recognized. In short, they gave excellent anthropological advice.³

Stacey and Thorne perceive such innovations in anthropology through the formula of paradigm shift. To them, feminist gains in anthropology have shifted paradigms in two senses: existing conceptual frameworks have been challenged, and the transformation has been accepted by others in the discipline. Thus "of all the disciplines, feminist anthropology has been the most successful in both of these dimensions."⁴

Anthropology is similarly, though less optimistically, singled out in Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gove's collection of essays on feminist perspectives in the academy.⁵ By comparison with the state of affairs in several disciplines, they conclude that anthropologists have long been sensitive to differences in male and female behavior, but they leave it at that. Whereas Stacey and Thorne see anthropology⁶ as accomplishing a double paradigm shift, Langland and Gove's more pessimistic reflections see the major shift still to come. However, these authors both take a transformation of frameworks as the criterion for success.

Langland and Gove speak of the resistance documented in their collections: the scholars agree that while a "feminist perspective has begun to affect the shape of what is known—and knowable—in their respective

³ See Jane Monnig Atkinson, "Anthropology (Review Essay)," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1982): 236–58, esp. 238. Ironically, Edwin Ardener's paper on the problem of women was written to elucidate certain features of model building and, in retrospect, has become a contribution to feminist literature; see Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in *The Interpretation of Ritual*, ed. Jean La Fontaine (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).

⁴ Stacey and Thorne, 302.

⁵ Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gove, *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; first published by the Society for Values in Higher Education and Vanderbilt University, 1981).

⁶ I refer to social/cultural anthropology. A moderate case for physical anthropology is put by Helen Longino and Ruth Doell, "Body, Bias, and Behavior: A Comparative Analysis of Reasoning in Two Areas of Biological Science," *Signs* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 206–27, esp. 226.

disciplines, perhaps the more urgent note in each essay is the failure of women's studies to alter college and university curricula. Paper after paper concludes that, while the potential power to transform the discipline is great, women's studies has not yet significantly unleashed that power.⁷ They echo an overview of women's studies that refers to the "massive resistance against which feminist scholars struggle."⁸ Langland and Gove ask about the cause of the failure. Their answer is in terms of a paradigm model (though this is not a phrase they use): "Women's studies has had so little impact on traditional bodies of knowledge because it challenges deeply held, often sacred beliefs. . . . [It] challenges vested interests; it uproots perspectives which are familiar, and, because familiar, comfortable. . . . [For] women's studies is not an additional knowledge merely to be tacked on to the curriculum. It is, instead, a body of knowledge that is *perspective transforming* and should therefore transform the existing curriculum from within and revise received notions of what constitutes an 'objective' or 'normative' perspective."⁹ In other words, feminist analyses have not substantially influenced traditional curricula because such analyses challenge fundamental disciplinary frameworks.

As far as the impact of feminist thought on anthropology is concerned, where would one place the resistance? Can one in fact see it in terms of challenge and counter-challenge over paradigms?

Social anthropology is in many ways an open discipline. Faced with an array of social and cultural systems, its practitioners tend to grab for a tool kit, in James Clifford's phrase (see n. 30), which contains such constructs as can be turned to analytical utility. Specializations proliferate—regional ethnography, economics and politics, legal theory—as do frameworks—Marxism, structuralism, symbolic anthropology. This tolerance made room for the study of gender and for feminist ideas. Yet a milieu of tolerance has also reduced feminist scholarship to just another approach, one way among many into the data. Consequently, a declared interest in putting women back on the map encourages theoretical containment. If feminist scholarship is seen as the study of women or of gender, its subject can be taken as something less than "society." Feminist anthropology is thus tolerated as a specialty that can be absorbed without challenge to the whole.

Within anthropology few names are associated with an exclusively feminist position. Rather, feminist anthropology is tied to a general cate-

⁷ Langland and Gove, 2.

⁸ Marilyn Boxer, "For and About Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States," in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. Nannerl Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo, and Barbara Gelpi (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 260.

⁹ Langland and Gove, 3–4.

gory, to “women” as its practitioners, as well as its subject matter.¹⁰ Clearly it is the intention of many feminist scholars to restore women to view. But it is unfortunate that their concerns can be concretized in this way. Where feminist anthropologists see themselves as taking on the whole of the discipline, they are met with a tendency to section off gender analysis or women’s studies from the rest of anthropology. Perhaps, as Langland and Gove would argue, this is a reaction to threat. Feminist-inspired anthropologists raising questions about male bias could be regarded as challenging the foundation of the subject, with its theoretical emphasis on group structures, on systems of authority, and on rules and norms, and with its assumptions about the description of total systems. Ironically, however, where these concepts have most powerfully come under scrutiny—and “groups,” “rules,” and “norms” have hardly survived the last decade—it has been in response to internal criticism that has had little to do with feminist theory. Meanwhile, social anthropology still continues to know itself as the study of social behavior or society in terms of systems and collective representations. If these constitute a paradigm, then it is largely intact.

Is this in fact a process of challenge and counter-challenge? Does feminist theory present a profound threat to core paradigms? And has the threat been ingeniously deflected by the rest of the anthropological population, assuming it is just “about women”? Both the idea of challenge and counter-challenge, and anthropology’s other face, its openness to feminist ideas, invite one to think in terms of paradigms. Indeed, Stacey and Thorne characterize the fields in which feminist thinking has had most headway as ones with “strong traditions of interpretive understanding,” that is, ones that are reflexive and self-critical.¹¹ Here the conclusion would seem to be that those disciplines most aware of the paradigmatic bases upon which they proceed will be most open to paradigm shift. This argument, however, contains an interesting flaw.

The flaw is made visible by the invocation of Thomas Kuhn’s work on paradigms in scientific theory. Without such a reminder one might get away with a commonsense understanding of paradigms as “basic conceptual frameworks and orienting assumptions of a body of knowledge.”¹² Yet one significant feature of the Kuhnian paradigm is that the scientists he studied become aware of paradigm shift only after the fact. The whole point

¹⁰ See Judith Shapiro, “Cross-cultural Perspectives on Sexual Differentiation,” in *Human Sexuality: A Comparative and Developmental Perspective*, ed. H. Katchadourian (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

¹¹ Stacey and Thorne (n. 1 above), 309.

¹² *Ibid.*, 302; Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Langland and Gove do not cite Kuhn, though their terminology strongly suggests that they are familiar with his work.

is that they do not aim to shift paradigms—they aim to account for things by what they know. The twin ideas of paradigms and the possibility of shifting them remain powerful ones. These ideas belong to the way innovative scholars represent themselves. They are part of the way *they talk* about what they do. The image of perspective transformation belongs to the rhetoric of radicalism—and requires explanation as part of that rhetoric.¹³

The rhetoric of paradigm shifting

Paradigm enters the vocabulary of the social sciences (and humanities) to refer to a constructed model. One may envisage new paradigms “invented” or an alternate paradigm “emerging.”¹⁴ The idea of overturning paradigms is a popular metaphor for the perceived challenge and counter-challenge in the relationship between feminist scholarship and established disciplines. It is the received radical view that people will defend their present paradigms because it is too uncomfortable or threatening to give up what one has. In her survey on women’s studies, Marilyn Boxer observes, “Just as many feminists found that the goals of the women’s movement could not be fulfilled by the ‘add-women-and-stir method,’ so women’s studies scholars discovered that academic fields could not be cured of sexism simply by accretion.”¹⁵ Initial compensatory scholarship led to the realization that only radical reconstruction would suffice. Many scholars have found an explanation in Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions. Kuhn’s formulations are taken as just as applicable to the social sciences as they are to the natural sciences for which he developed them. I suggest that they are less applicable than appears at first sight.

I give one example. Elizabeth Janeway follows Kuhn’s formulations in detail to show that they provide a powerful analogy for the investigation of sex stereotypes.¹⁶ He defined a paradigm as an implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism. Change is first evaluated, then registered as an anomaly—the pressure of anomalies eventually forcing a new normative model. Janeway argues that male representations of female sexuality provide patterns that fit into the accepted structure of behavior, beliefs that provide a source of permissible metaphors through which people think about themselves, standards for behavior, and exemplars learned from the

¹³ See Longino and Doell; Donna Haraway, “In the Beginning Was the Word: The Genesis of Biological Theory,” *Signs* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 469–81.

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Janeway, “Who Is Sylvia? On the Loss of Sexual Paradigms,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 573–89, esp. 588; and Ethel Spector Person, “Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 605–30, esp. 613.

¹⁵ Boxer, 258.

¹⁶ Janeway.

anonymous pressure of ascriptive social mythology. Beliefs about female sexuality also act like Kuhnian paradigms in their response to anomalies. Over time, anomalies force paradigms into a different position; instead of being taken for granted, they become ideals preached about. Indeed, she is concerned to press the point that for some, male sexual stereotypes never fitted. Women could never share fully in them, since they cannot fit themselves into expectations of male normalcy. Paradigms in her view establish the rules of normalcy.

Yet, what do we do with the internal contradictions that Janeway's "paradigms" also seem to entail? The very construction of normalcy along exclusive male lines, for instance, invites questions about the place of men and women in relation to its definition of what is normal. Janeway writes, "The shared beliefs and values expressed by our 'paradigms' of female sexuality are not, in fact, shared fully by the women who have had to take them as models."¹⁷ I would suggest that the fact they are not shared comes less from a failure of a paradigm to accommodate reality than from the structure of an ideology which, in speaking to certain social interests, also reproduces others and thus promotes contradictory propositions. It is important, then, to look at the manner in which so-called paradigms are shared.

Sandra Coyner advises women's studies practitioners to "abandon the energy-draining and still overwhelmingly unsuccessful effort to transform the established disciplines. Instead they should continue developing the new community of feminist scholars who will eventually discover new paradigms and found a new normative science."¹⁸ This interesting statement breaks with the assumption that paradigms are like some set of cultural norms; instead, it locates paradigms in relation to a community of practitioners. The question is whether we are still dealing with paradigms or not.

Kuhn himself claims that his investigations in natural science stemmed from realizing the extent to which social science, by contrast, was characterized by overt disagreement. He professes to be puzzled at the way his notion of paradigm had been adopted in other fields.¹⁹ Kuhn notes the specific nature of the community in natural science: there are relatively few competing schools, so that revolutions affect universal perceptions; a community's members are the only judge of one another; and puzzle solving is an end in itself. Kuhn emphasizes the shared meanings of paradigms which both define a scientific community and are defined by it. Of course, scientific communities exist at different levels, but on the whole there will be agreement about the status of their disagreements. Above all, there is

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 575.

¹⁸ Cited by Boxer, 260.

¹⁹ Kuhn (n. 12 above), on the first point, viii; on the second, 208.

general agreement about scientists' relationship to their subject matter: the world presents them with problems to be solved.

These are the characteristics of a closed system. Revolution serves only to close the system again: successive paradigms replace or substitute for one another. Overt competition between paradigms is short-lived because the proponents of the new paradigm claim they have solved the problems that put the old one in crisis. Yet this hardly fits the present case of feminist scholarship, insofar as it has an interest in sustaining antagonism between "paradigms." Here it is the very championing of a new "paradigm" that makes the old one problematic. Indeed, it is in feminists' overt interests to take a conflict view of their social context. If so, its explicit conceptual frameworks cannot be regarded as paradigms.

Competitive premises

Talking about paradigms is not the same as using them. The metaphor suggests the immovability of massive foundations and the herculean task it would be to dislodge them. Yet when we are dealing with social scientists who constantly overturn their own theories and construct explicit histories of internal revolution, I do not think the key to resistance is feminism's challenge to intellectual frameworks, let alone "paradigms." I wish to account for the awkwardness in the relationship between anthropology and feminism, and the continuing resistance that feminist scholarship encounters, in different terms. *Talk* about "paradigms" belongs to the conscious effort to establish a new subject matter. What cannot be so self-consciously shifted, I shall argue, is the nature of investigators' *relationship* to their subject matter that particular scholarly practices create. We must look to the social constitution of both feminist and anthropological practice.

Neither feminist scholarship nor social anthropology is closed in the Kuhnian sense. Thus there is no one anthropology; its practitioners range from determinists to relativists, from those interested in power relations to those who give primacy to cultural models, from the political economists to the hermeneuticists. Many of these positions correspond to philosophical ones or have counterparts in history or literary criticism. When anthropologists call themselves poststructuralists, they cannot escape contemporary literary traditions any more than they ever could claim a monopoly on the concept of structuralism. It should be no surprise, then, that small as it is, the field of feminist anthropology is based on divisions. Social anthropological studies of women persistently divide into two camps over whether or not sexual asymmetry is universal. One side argues that Western constructs blind us from seeing egalitarianism in unfamiliar contexts and that we encounter hierarchical relations only in the historical context of privatized ownership. The other side argues that we should look for sexual

inequality in all its forms, for sexual difference everywhere contributes to socially constituted differences. Diane Bell has called these “evolutionist” and “universalist” positions; they echo established strategies in the anthropological handling of cross-cultural data.²⁰

Anyone overviewing feminist theory also has to accommodate its explicitly self-differentiated positions. Labels have a political flavor: liberal/radical/Marxist-socialist. The political vantage points provide a model for the differentiation of feminist vantage points, which again replicate potential intellectual divisions within Western society at large. Indeed, it may look as though there is an impossible array of theoretical positions within feminist debate: “Here we are speaking in many voices.”²¹ Yet it is a phenomenon of feminism that the positions are held explicitly in relation to one another. Through the vast amount of internal criticism and counter-criticism, the voices depend on one another’s presence. It need hardly be instanced that Marxist-socialist feminism places itself in relation to both liberal and radical feminism and is constantly commenting on the fact. The arguments are never dispatched. In other words, no one viewpoint is self-reproductive: feminist “theory” is created dialogically, in the sense that all the positions in the debate constitute its base. The pluralism that characterizes both anthropology and feminist scholarship would seem to have them touch mutual ground at several points. And here is the contrast with natural science: not simply that within such scholarly practice one finds diverse “schools” (also true in science) but also that their premises are by their nature *constructed competitively* in relation to one another.

Kuhn characterized the relationship of scientific scholars to their subject matter as one of problem solving. The natural world is conceived as made up of different things, ultimately related through sets of “laws” which by “natural logic”²² cannot be in conflict. The problem is how to specify these laws. Paradigms provide rules for registering the nature of the problem and what its solution would look like. In the social sciences, however, the differences between the theoretical positions I have been talking about correspond to the formation of different social interests. The social world is conceived as made up of persons who are basically similar but divided between themselves by interests that may indeed conflict; more than that, “social logic” allows contradictory viewpoints. Scholarly

²⁰ Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 245–46.

²¹ Haraway (n. 13 above), 481; see also Michèle Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1980); Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1984); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), esp. xix; Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspectives* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982).

²² Compare T. M. S. Evens, “Mind, Logic and the Efficacy of the Nuer Incest Prohibition,” *Man*, n.s., 18 (1983): 111–33.

practice concerned with the constitution of this social world internally replicates this differentiation. It would be pointless to seek a homogenization or reconciliation of all points of view; there can be, in this sense, no common worldview. What is seen to constitute the social world, rather, is the nature of the relationships between different views from different social positions.

The anthropologist does not wish to assimilate the character of other systems to his or her own. The essence of the comparative method is to make sense of differences, not collapse them. Feminist theory also has an interest in difference—in constantly bringing to mind the “difference it makes” to consider things from a perspective that includes women’s interests. Insofar as men’s and women’s interests are opposed, perpetual effort must bring this to attention. Again, homogenization makes no sense. Feminism’s and anthropology’s concerns in promoting difference would seem to be further grounds for mutual convergence. So why the resistance?

The answer cannot lie in “paradigms,” first, because the different theoretical positions occupied in the social sciences are not analogous to the paradigms of Kuhnian science. They are based on overt conflict between competitive conceptual frameworks which cannot be reduced to single positions and, second, because theoretical positions, in anthropology at least, are in fact overturned and displaced very easily—radicalisms abound. It may be objected that such positions are not, then, really of paradigmatic status, and we should look for deeper paradigms. Yet to do so would be easier from *within* anthropology: for instance, it is encounters with alien social and cultural systems that allow one to scrutinize the subject/object dichotomy or commodity notions that inform Western concepts of personhood and identity. From the anthropological point of view, much feminist thinking participates in such constructs, embodying ethnocentric commentary upon the world. Third, the awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology is lived most dramatically in the tension experienced by those who practice feminist anthropology. They are caught between structures: the scholar is faced with two different ways of relating to her or his subject matter. The tension must be kept going; there can be no relief in substituting the one for the other.

Neighbors in tension

For the tension between feminist scholarship and anthropology, I have used the term “awkward,” to suggest a doorstep hesitation rather than barricades. Each in a sense mocks the other, because each so nearly achieves what the other aims for as an ideal relation with the world.

There is, in anthropological inquiry, a long tradition of breaking with

the past, so that theoretical generations tend to be short-lived. A recent heir to this constant radicalization are innovations interesting in the present context for the weight placed on the interpretation of *experience*. Experience is also an explicit topic of feminist inquiry. The well-argued radical view is that feminist theory is “experiential,”²³ in the sense that its first step is consciousness raising. In transmuted form, a number of feminist anthropologists emphasize the significance of experience. Rayna Rapp reported in her 1979 review of anthropology the “search for analysis of more finely delineated female experience”; she later notes interest in “the lived body”—women’s self-concepts as mediated through perceptions of their bodies.²⁴ Nancy Scheper-Hughes addresses a feminist anthropology that explores “the nature of the self” in the fieldwork situation: ethnography as “intellectual autobiography.”²⁵ Yet the focus on similar issues in general ethnographic writing has proceeded as a quite independent radical development, without regard for the feminist contribution. The anthropologist’s aim is to grasp “lived experience” through perceptions of the body;²⁶ “a new anthropology of ritual experience” is heralded in a collection of essays on initiation rites.²⁷ Feminist interest in these matters would not be challenging “paradigms” that are not already under challenge from within the anthropology. I think this is because “experience” is not the common meeting ground it appears to be, and my focus on it will be a focus on the awkwardness between anthropology and feminist scholarship as such. I briefly contrast the way the idea of experience is used in nonanthropological feminist discourse and in nonfeminist anthropological discourse. In each case it is developed as a weapon against orthodoxy.

Feminist scholarship sees itself as challenging stereotypes that misrepresent women’s experiences. Women’s experience may be set against male ideology, including academic theory building, which appropriates speech and image in the interests of patriarchy. These are the images of sexuality of which Janeway talked—women being made to feel in certain ways about themselves, as though that thinking could be done for them. Closely tied to

²³ Nannerl Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo, and Barbara Gelpi, eds., “Foreword” to *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (n. 8 above), vii; also Cheri Register, “Literary Criticism (Review Essay),” *Signs* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 268–82, esp. 269. Stacey and Thorne note that feminist theorists “are reconsidering the relationship between knower and known to develop a method of inquiry that will preserve the presence of the subject as an actor and experienter,” and stress their affinity to others who contribute to hermeneutic and neo-Marxist critiques of positivist social science (n. 1 above), 309.

²⁴ Rayna Rapp, “Anthropology (Review Essay),” *Signs* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 497–513, esp. 500 and 503.

²⁵ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Introduction: The Problem of Bias in Androcentric and Feminist Anthropology,” *Women’s Studies* 10 (1983): 115.

²⁶ Michael Jackson, “Knowledge of the Body,” *Man*, n.s., 18 (1983): 327–45.

²⁷ Gilbert Herdt, “Preface” to *Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), esp. xix.

the personal, experience cannot but resonate with conditions as they are, even if its meaning has to be brought up to individual consciousness. Experience thus becomes the instrument of a knowledge which cannot be appropriated by Others. It can only be shared with like persons.

Essential to this view of the feminist task is the need to expose and thereby destroy the authority of other persons to determine feminine experience. The constant rediscovery that women are the Other in men's accounts reminds women that they must see men as the Other in relation to themselves. Creating a space for women becomes creating a space for the self, and experience becomes an instrument for knowing the self. Necessary to the construction of the feminist self, then, is a nonfeminist Other.²⁸ The Other is most generally conceived as "patriarchy," the institutions and persons who represent male domination, often simply concretized as "men." Because the goal is to restore to subjectivity a self dominated by the Other, there can be no shared experience with persons who stand for the Other.

Within anthropology, the ethnographer's focus on experience signals an effort to remain open to people's emotional and personal lives. The problem is that in writing his or her account, the ethnographer must first translate another's experience through his or her own and then render experience in the written word. Contemporary experimentation with biography, narrative, and novel constitutes an explicit response to this.²⁹ Experimentation includes recent self-conscious attempts to let the anthropologists' subjects speak for themselves. As a historian of anthropology, James Clifford describes a new genre of works designed to reproduce multiple authorship. Paul Rabinow typifies the genre as poststructuralist, an "intercalation of mixed genres of texts and voices."³⁰ In allowing the so-called informant to speak in his or her own voice, the resulting ethnography replicates the interlocutory process of fieldwork, which always rests on collaboration between anthropologist and informant. Anthropologists and their reactions are thus part of the data, rather than being mysterious hidden hands. The anthropologist's own experiences are the lens through which others of his or her own society may achieve a like understanding.

²⁸ See Haraway (n. 13 above); and Genevieve Lloyd, "History of Philosophy and the Critique of Reason," *Critical Philosophy* 1 (1984): 5–23, esp. 14. However, Keohane et al., eds. (n. 8 above), delimit varieties of consciousness, of which consciousness of oneself as the object of another's attention is only one.

²⁹ Michael Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Michael Young, *Magicians of Manumanua: Living Myth in Kalauna* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).

³⁰ Paul Rabinow, "'Facts Are a Word of God': An Essay Review of James Clifford's *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World*," in *Observers Observed: History of Anthropology*, ed. G. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 196–207, esp. 196; also James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1 (1983): 118–46.

These experiences consequently become a vehicle for cross-cultural commentary, as when Rabinow's personal reactions in the field reveal a "cultural self."³¹

Anthropology here constitutes itself in relation to an Other, vis-à-vis the alien culture/society under study. Its distance and foreignness are deliberately sustained. But the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other, as in the search for a medium of expression that will offer mutual interpretation, perhaps visualized as a common text, or a dialogue. Clifford develops the concept of "discourse" to evoke the structure of a dialogue that retains the distinct multiple voices of its authors yet yields a product that they all to some extent share. Under attack, by contrast, is that part of oneself embodied in the tradition to which one is heir. It is claimed that the pretensions of the old anthropology obliterated the multiple authorship of fieldwork data and did not acknowledge the input either of the informant or of the anthropologist's particular experience.

Feminist inquiry suggests that it is possible to discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the Other. Thus one may seek to regain a common past which is also one's own. Anthropological inquiry suggests that the self can be consciously used as a vehicle for representing an Other. But this is only possible if the self breaks with its own past. These thus emerge as two very different radicalisms. For all their parallel interests, the two practices are differently structured in the way they organize knowledge and draw boundaries, in short, in terms of the social relations that define their scholarly communities.

Perhaps the differences could be turned into a dialogue between feminist scholarship and anthropology. But it would be an awkward dialogue insofar as each has a potential for undermining the other. For both are vulnerable on the ethical grounds they hold to be so important. I construct a hypothetical encounter to make the point.

Mockery between neighbors

How can feminism be said to mock this style of anthropology? The anthropologist is trying to establish him or herself as an interpreter of experiences. Yet obviously the anthropologist would also admit to being in control of the final text. However much multiple authorship is acknowledged, using people's experiences to make statements about matters of anthropological interest in the end subordinates them to the uses of the discipline. But that does not mean it is a worthless exercise. On the

³¹ See, e.g., Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

contrary, and the reason the issue of ethics is raised, the plea that multiple authorship is desirable speaks to an ideal relationship with informants. The ethnographer is anxious not simply to render the experience of others in his or her own terms, but to preserve their separate dignity. To present a monograph as a collaborative production, then, is a metaphor for an ideal ethical situation in which neither voice is submerged by the Other.³²

From a feminist perspective, of course, there can be no collaboration with the Other. This anthropological ideal is a delusion, overlooking the crucial dimension of different social interests. There can be no parity between the authorship of the anthropologist and the informant; the dialogue must always be asymmetrical. Whether the prime factors are the colonial relations between the societies from which both anthropologists and informants come or the use to which the text will be put, the social worlds of anthropologist and informant are different. They have no interests in common to be served by this purportedly common product.

Although I have used the case of the innovative ethnography of experience, ethnography in general draws on values widespread within the discipline. Anthropological practice would cease if it could not implement in some way or another a working ethic of humanism.³³ The feminist critique comes from different premises, but that does not prevent its poking fun at anthropological pretensions at their most vulnerable. Indeed, mockery always comes from a different vantage point, so the blow strikes infuriatingly at a tangent. But feminists come close to displaying an alternative route to what anthropologists hope to achieve in collaborative enterprises. Feminist scholars can claim substantial interests in common with the people they study. They may be speaking woman to woman, or else have a common ground in understanding systems of domination.

How, then, could anthropology possibly mock feminism? The radical feminist approach emphasizes the conscious creation of the self by seeing its difference from the Other. Women have to know the extent to which their lives are molded by patriarchal values. It is an achievement to perceive the gulf, and in turn, an ethical position, for this is what validates women's commitment to one another. Now, if such feminism mocks the anthropological pretension of creating a product in some ways jointly authored, then anthropology mocks the pretension that feminists can ever really achieve that separation from an antithetical Other which they desire. From a vantage point outside their own culture, anthropologists see that

³² Rabinow suggests that it is not authenticity that Leenhardt's coauthored texts claim but "an *ethically* superior product of joint work" (my italics), 204; see James Clifford, "Fieldwork, Reciprocity and the Making of Ethnographic Texts: The Example of Maurice Leenhardt," *Man*, n.s., 15 (1980): 518-32; and Young (n. 29 above), 34-35.

³³ Robert Bellah, "Foreword" to Rabinow (n. 31 above), esp. xii.

the very basis for the separation rests on common cultural suppositions about the nature of personhood and of relationships. If women construct subjectivity for themselves, they do so strictly within the sociocultural constraints of their own society. The establishment of self must endorse a worldview shared equally by the Other.

Again, these constitute ethical issues over which feminist thinkers concern themselves: silent speech; connivance and participation in oppression; how we set about creating a feminist discourse that rejects domination, when language itself is conceived as an instrument of domination.³⁴ Feminism requires a dogma of separatism as a political instrument in order to constitute a common cause. Anthropologists mock feminists by almost effortlessly achieving that distance from their own society which feminists create with such anguish. Yet, again, the mockery also glances off, because in fact feminists inhabit their own society, and the discovery that their values are culture bound is irrelevant. Feminists can only operationalize their perspectives if these are held to have some congruence with reality. Thus they do not need to know that “really” they cannot distinguish themselves from the oppressive Other; on the contrary, what they need to know are all the ways in which “really” they can and must.

If we were to seek in the social sciences ideas comparable to the status that paradigms hold in natural science, it might be helpful to recall that paradigms in Kuhn’s account are shared worldviews that come from doing science rather than from acquiring rules for doing it.

In the natural sciences such worldviews necessarily take the form of intellectual paradigms, that is, models for organizing knowledge about the world. I have suggested that the conscious theorizings about knowledge that characterize both anthropological and feminist thought are not best conceptualized as paradigms. Yet there *is* a set of views analogous to paradigms regarded by feminists and by anthropologists alike as so fundamental that neither could proceed without them. But these views cannot be open to conscious challenge, because they define the very practice by which each acts. They thus do not appear as “views” at all, but as knowledge of the world. It is a social world and involves the differing relationships that feminists and anthropologists have constructed toward the Other.

Although I dwell on particular approaches, the construals of the Other briefly described here can be generalized to feminism and anthropology overall. These constructions are fundamental. When brought into the open and compared, their proponents cannot possibly challenge each other, for the one is no substitute for the other. As Kuhn writes of the proponents of

³⁴ See Jean Bethke Elstain, “Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning,” in Keohane et al., eds. (n. 8 above), 145.

competing scientific paradigms, they practice their trades in different worlds. Indeed, the properly paradigmatic status of these two practices is revealed in the extent to which they appear *irrelevant* to each other and thus offer not challenge but what I have called mockery.

*Department of Social Anthropology
University of Manchester*