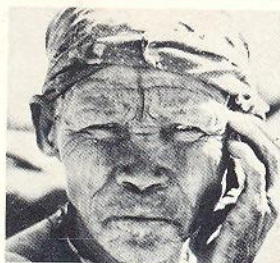


Toward an Anthropology of Women

edited by Rayna R. Reiter



Rayna R. Reiter

Introduction

This book has its roots in the women's movement. To explain and describe equality and inequality between the sexes, contemporary feminism has turned to anthropology with many questions in its search for a theory and a body of information. These questions are more than academic: the answers will help feminists in the struggle against sexism in our own society. The subjugation of women is a fact of our daily existence, yet it neither began with modern capitalism nor automatically disappears in socialist societies. In looking at other cultures, we find that sexual inequality appears widespread and that the institutions in which it is embedded have a long and complex history. To truly understand the phenomenon, we must find its roots and trace them in their many permutations and transformations. Our political critique must be based on this understanding of the origins and development of sexism.

Because it incorporates both cross-cultural data and theories about the evolution of society, anthropology at first glance appears to be useful to feminists in this search. It studies the origins and functions of family systems, sex roles and socialization, differences in the division of labor. But underlying all these investigations are certain assumptions about the position of women that make the field suspect. Most anthropologists read rather directly from biology to culture, asserting that woman's role in reproduction is responsible for the earliest forms of the division of labor, and

~~that male~~ supremacy flows from this division.* Feminists, however, have wanted to know *why*; for them, the direct relation of mothering to cultural subordination is anything but obvious, especially in light of the array of cross-cultural data describing the wide range of women's active roles. Mainstream anthropology has been closed to, or has tended to trivialize, the very questions feminist students are asking.

Over several semesters, as I helped to organize and teach a student-initiated course on women from an anthropological perspective, I was forced to reexamine my own training and the theories underlying it. The course was an exciting one, but it was also terribly frustrating. The more we read, the less trusting we became of the authors and their perspectives; anthropology's contribution to a feminist theory is contaminated by the same assumptions that pervade our culture as a whole. A great deal of information on women exists, but it frequently comes from questions asked of men about their wives, daughters, and sisters, rather than from the women themselves. Men's information is too often presented as a group's reality, rather than as only part of a cultural whole. Too often women and their roles are glossed over, under-analyzed, or absent from all but the edges of the description. What women do is perceived as household work and what they talk about is called gossip, while men's work is viewed as the economic base of society and their information is seen as important social communication. Kinship studies are usually centered on males, marriage systems are analyzed in terms of the exchanges men make using women to weave their networks, evolutionary models explain the origin and development of human society by giving enormous weight to the male role of hunting without much consideration of female gathering. These are all instances of a deeply rooted male orientation which makes the anthropological discourse suspect.** All our information must be filtered through a critical

* Marxist anthropologists tend to claim that the earliest human communities were either sexually egalitarian or matriarchal; their claims, however, have been summarily dismissed for reasons having to do with both the data on contemporary societies and the political history of anthropology.

** There have been exceptions to this male bias within anthropology.

lens to examine the biases inherent in it. Theory always underlies the way we collect, analyze, and present data; it is never neutral. Looking for information about ourselves and about women in other societies, feminists have had to join Third World peoples, American Blacks, and Native Americans in expressing their distrust of the body of literature which mainstream anthropology has called objective.*

We need to be aware of the potential for a double male bias in anthropological accounts of other cultures: the bias we bring with us to our research, and the bias we receive if the society we study expresses male dominance. All anthropologists wear the blinders of their own civilization in approaching other cultures; our eyes are as conditioned as those of the people we study.** Our own academic training reflects, supports, and extends the assumptions of male superiority to which our culture subscribes. The vast majority of anthropologists who survive training, fieldwork, degregetting, and publishing to give us our information are either men, or women trained by men. We might say that the selection for people who agree on what the important questions are and how they are to be answered is strong, and is strongly

Classics such as Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament* (1935) or Ruth Landes' *Ojibwa Woman* (1938) have found a place in the field. Other researchers and their work have fared less well (see, for example, Salter's book on Daisy Bates [1972]). In the last few years, as women's status within our own culture has again become problematic, there have been articles and books that take the woman's perspective into account. For examples, see Elizabeth Fee's feminist interpretation of nineteenth-century evolutionism (1973); Marilyn Strathern's discussion of the experiences of women in an overtly male-dominant New Guinea group (1972), and Rosaldo and Lamphere's collection of articles providing insights into the role of women in ideological and political systems in a variety of cultures (1974). It must be stressed, however, that there is not a massive amount of such work available, and that what exists is not widely used by most anthropologists in their research or teaching, but is consigned to a feminist ghetto within anthropology.

* See Hymes, 1972; Deloria, 1969; Mafeje, 1971; and Lewis, 1973, for such critiques of anthropological practice and theory, and for responses to them from within the field.

** See Diamond's discussion of the notion of progress as inherent in civilization (1974), or Valentine's work on the relation between anthropological theory and Black Studies (1972) for examples.

male oriented.* Anthropology is no different in this from other disciplines. Male bias is carried into field research. It is often claimed that men in other cultures are more accessible to outsiders (especially male outsiders) for questioning. A more serious and prior problem is that we think that men control the significant information in other cultures, as we are taught to believe they do in ours. We search them out and tend to pay little attention to the women. Believing that men are easier to talk to, more involved in the crucial cultural spheres, we fulfill our own prophecies in finding them to be better informants in the field.

Male bias is surmountable, just as racial bias, or any form of ethnocentrism, is, but only when it is taken seriously as an area for self-critical investigation. Anthropology has developed a theoretical perspective that separates biology from culture in the investigation of race;** it has the potential to make the same discrimination with regard to gender. When investigating other issues, anthropologists rarely make the mistake of reading automatically from a presumed biological base to the superstructure built upon it—yet in analyzing gender, they do exactly this. Recent studies on the biological bases of sex differences and on human gender systems have revealed flexible, culturally influenced structures (for examples, see Money and Ehrhardt, 1972; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Oakley, 1973). Rather than assuming biology-as-destiny (a highly questionable position for a field noted for its studies of cultural plasticity), we need to incorporate subtler information on both biology and culture into new models of how gender operates within all human societies.

The second area of male bias can only be approached once the first is accorded significance. It is the thorny problem of male dominance in the societies we study. In the anthro-

* Popular images of anthropology as a field dominated by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead notwithstanding, the facts and figures give us about the same degree of male predominance in the production of academic degrees, publications, and rank within university hierarchies as other social sciences (for recent figures on sexual stratification within anthropology, see Vance, 1975).

** See, for example, Stocking's discussion of Boas' formulation of the distinctions among race, language, and culture (1968).

pological record, cultures seem to display a wide range of variation in the amount of sexual equality or inequality expressed consciously by members of both sexes. Some, such as hunting-gathering groups like the BaMbuti or !Kung, assert minimal or no status differences, while others, such as the Mae Enga horticulturalists or the Fulani pastoralists, show a strong degree of segregation by sex and a hierarchy which accords men more prestige. Groups that have the same mode of production may have radically different sexual status systems depending, for instance, on whether they are matrilineal or patrilineal. Yet we do not even know what we mean when we define a group as having "male dominance." Even among the non-human primates, dominance and aggression are labels that must be used carefully; we should not lump behaviors that have to do with such diverse activities as food-getting, sexual success, leadership in a troop's movement, and so on into one category (see Dolhinow, 1971). When we apply such terms to humans, what are we labeling? Is it a strict division of labor by sex, with more cultural value being awarded to male activities? Or does male dominance refer to situations in which men possess the power to physically control women ("We tame our women with the banana," say Mundurucu men, referring to gang rape). If we only have a vague idea of what constitutes dominance, we cannot know if it reflects the experience of both men and women, or if it is instead something the men assert and the women deny (as in Kaberry's study). In such a case, is dominance a male fantasy? An anthropological fantasy? Or an expression of the internal workings and contradictions of a system for which we have only half the pieces? It is not clear that primitive peoples dichotomize their world into power domains. Coming from an extremely hierarchical cultural milieu, we tend to construct categories to contain social differences, and then rank them in terms of power. We build master-theories out of such notions of difference, but we do not know if the oppositions and hierarchies we construct are universal or simply reflect our own experience in a class-stratified society.*

* For a critical assessment of Lévi-Strauss' structural model of hierarchy built on the principles of binary oppositions, see Diamond, 1974.

If anthropological descriptions of male dominance are ambiguous, interpretations constructed to explain its origins are even more so. Some anthropologists assert that early societies were sexually egalitarian, and that male supremacy arose with the growth of class society and colonial penetration (see, for example, Leacock, 1972). Others assert that the division of labor between male hunting and female mothering has always included some amount of male dominance (notably, Washburn and Lancaster, 1968, and the pop ethnology-types, such as Tiger and Fox [1971], Morris [1967], etc.). A third group places the exchange of women by men in marriage alliances at the heart of culture (for instance, see Lévi-Strauss, 1969), and some extend this structuralist perspective to conclude that in the distinction between nature and culture, alleged to be made by all peoples, women fall on the former, devalued side of the "great divide" (see Ortner, 1974). The efficacy of any of these explanations is open for discussion precisely because so many basic questions are barely posed, much less answered.

We need new studies that will focus on women; it cannot be otherwise because of the double bias which has trivialized and misinterpreted female roles for so long. Yet the final outcome of such an approach will be a reorientation of anthropology so that it studies *humankind*. Focusing first on women, we must redefine the important questions, re-examine all previous theories, and be critical in our acceptance of what constitutes factual material. Armed with such a consciousness, we can proceed to new investigations of gender in our own and other cultures.

This collection of essays is presented in support of such radical investigations and redefinitions. The first three papers relate directly to issues of male bias in the interpretation of the biological and cultural evolutionary record. Leibowitz examines the popular belief that physical differences between the sexes (dimorphism) are directly responsible for social-role differentiation, a phenomenon we are alleged to have inherited from our nonhuman primate past. Yet according to her reading of the data, biology is not social destiny, even

among monkeys and apes, and she advances another hypothesis to explain sexual dimorphism among these species. Slocum criticizes the widely accepted hypothesis that male hunting was the context in which cultural evolution developed. She combines basic data on the fossil record, our primate ancestors, and contemporary hunting-gathering groups to develop an alternative model of cultural evolution which is more fully human. Gough's article on early forms of the family and contemporary families among hunter-gatherers also reviews a wide range of information and criticizes the bias which has produced a portrait of extensive male dominance among such groups.

The next three essays examine aspects of sexual equality in groups organized primarily along the lines of kinship. Draper compares sexual egalitarianism among the !Kung in their foraging context with the changing sex roles and the beginning of male dominance that accompany sedentarization. Her research may be interpreted as partial support for Engels' hypothesis concerning the development of male predominance as it is linked to acquisition of private property. Leavitt, Sykes, and Weatherford examine the theory, methodology, and data-collection of male and female anthropologists studying the Australian Aborigines. They question both the information and the interpretation that has led to the portrayal of women as subordinate in Aboriginal life, and suggests a reformulation based on the work of women anthropologists with a consciousness that stems from their roles in their own society. Faithorn's fieldwork among the Káfe of Highland New Guinea has led her to reexamine the concepts of pollution and alleged female inferiority that are widespread in the area. Looking at ways in which both sexes can pollute, and heeding the Káfe's own evaluation of sexual relations, she advances a rather different interpretation.

The focus in the next two articles shifts to theories concerning the origin of gender relations. Webster summarizes recent work on the matriarchy debate, including both Marxist and feminist views of the origins of female subordination. She discusses the matriarchy as a vision of female power,

assessing its role in our projections for an egalitarian future. Rubin analyzes how the female of the species becomes an oppressed, domesticated woman. Using tools provided by Marx, Engels, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss, she constructs a critical theory of the process of female subordination.

Much of the debate within feminist theory has been centered on acceptance or rejection of Engels' interpretation of the role of women in differing modes of production. The next two papers are informed by this debate. Sacks reworks some of Engels' ideas about the role of socially necessary labor, using as example a comparison of the social adult statuses of women in four African societies. Judith Brown gives us an ethnohistorical analysis of the Iroquois, the group which perhaps comes closest to popular notions of a matriarchy. She claims that it is not only the women's contribution to productive labor, but their control over the distribution of what is produced that forms the basis for female domestic and political power.

The next three papers examine contemporary West European peasant groups. Reiter describes and analyzes the existence of male and female domains, one public, one private, in a southern French village, and uses that example to speculate about the creation of such a division in the evolution of state-organized societies. Harding takes the differences between male and female language in a Spanish village and investigates the ways in which it reflects and reproduces differential access to formal and informal power in peasant life. Silverman uses the anthropological category of life crisis to analyze the tensions in courtship and early marriage for central Italian women, describing differences among women of two economic groups.

The three papers which follow present aspects of the changing role of women in Third World countries. Susan Brown looks at the effects of poverty on women in the Dominican Republic, analyzing the matrifocal household, consensual unions, and extended women's networks as adaptive strategies for survival. Rubbo examines the spread of rural capitalism in Colombia, and shows that it causes an

increase in sexual tension and in matrifocality as women become increasingly dependent on both the plantation owners and the men of their households. Remy discusses the differential access to work for men and women in urban Nigeria. Using a range of examples, from totally secluded women to those active in trading and in the petty bourgeois professions, she looks at schooling, religious and community associations, and the availability of investment capital as they affect the wives of men working in the modern capitalist sector. All three papers note that patterns of domination worsen by sex as well as by class with capitalist penetration, especially under conditions of dependency capitalism.

The final essay is an examination of the situation of rural women in the People's Republic of China. Diamond analyzes the changing status of women as the Chinese contend with the patriarchal kinship systems that have endured through the transition to socialism.

Taken together, the papers in this collection provide some guidelines and examples of directions for an anthropology of women. They point to the need for a critical reanalysis of our notions of cultural and biological evolution, and serve as a corrective to the bias of mainstream anthropology. They give us enriched data on the productive roles of women, and on women's own experience of these roles, and sensitize us to the complexities of male supremacy in cultures in which this is expressed. These essays assume that the women's experience may be different from that of the men, and is therefore the legitimate subject for investigation. Above all, they subject our notions of male dominance to specific analysis, and push us to understand that it is anything but natural. As an artifact of culture, such patterns have undergone changes that we can analyze, and are amenable to changes for which we can actively work. This collection aims to provide information and theory on the bases for sexual equality or inequality, and to contribute to the analysis which must always accompany action for fundamental social change.