Once Upon a Time . . . : Comments on the Myth of Female Dominance

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Abstract: The author shows how the articles in this special issue are representative of the new trends in women/gender studies. Reviewing the general orientations in that field for the last 25 years, she points out that more recent studies abandon broad generalizations on dominance attributed to human nature and emphasize more localized analyses of the distribution and use of power.

Résumé: L'auteure montre comment les articles de ce numéro spécial font partie de la nouvelle orientation dans l'étude de femmes/rapports sociaux de sexe. Passant en revue les grandes orientations qui ont marqué ce champ dans les 25 dernières années, elle signale que les études plus récentes abandonnent les généralisations catégoriques sur la dominance attribuées à la nature humaine pour favoriser des études plus localisées et plus spécifiques sur l'exercice et la distribution du pouvoir.

A French version of this article follows (p. 161).

It requires a considerable stretch of the imagination to remember that 25 years ago, the anthropology of gender was barely emergent as a legitimate domain of inquiry. The ethnographic record included very little information about the activities and experience of the female half of humanity, and the elaboration of an analytic apparatus to justify and guide the study of women or gender was a somewhat subversive exercise with respect to some of the well-entrenched assumptions and beliefs then shaping our discipline. Since then, of course, the landscape has changed. Ethnographic attention to gender has become more *de rigueur* than *osé*, and by now, an overwhelming quantity of data on women and gender have been generated, and considerably more sophisticated analytic tools have been developed to treat it.

My own research interests have shifted elsewhere since those heady days of the 1970s when we were trying to invent a new field of inquiry. I nonetheless find it interesting to glance from time to time at the state of the field in its current mature state, as the papers in this collection allow. In an effort to make a virtue of necessity, I propose to cast a backward look, framing my comments with reference to some of those old debates of a generation ago, as these seem salient to the work presented here.

Several ideas that were considered more or less self-evident within anthropology as it was generally taught by the 1960s made the study of women and gender relations either uninteresting or outside the purview of ethnographic investigation and analysis. One of these was the notion that relationships between men and women are determined to a significant degree by considerations that are not amenable to social scientific—or at least anthropological—analysis. Rather, they were considered to be primarily determined by "imponderables" in Evans-Pritchard's (1965: 42) subsequently notorious, throw-away term. These were understood to include individual personalities and psyches, the powerful force of sexual

relationships, the very specific circumstances of individual lives and so on. In other words, gendered relationships were thought to be determined less by social arrangements or cultural beliefs than by other kinds of factors, and therefore were considered to be among those phenomena that cannot be adequately explained or understood through social or cultural analysis (1965: 56).

Another precept that braked the development of gender studies was the notion that male dominance is among the few universals of human society. That is, in all places and times, men have controlled most of the important areas of life that are susceptible to human control. As a universal, this feature could best be understood as a function of human nature or human society (singular), although it was generally treated as a basic fact, hardly meriting more than passing reference in introductory lectures or textbooks (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 54; Fox, 1969: 31-32; Richards, 1972: 70). Whatever cross-cultural variation might exist in gendered patterns of dominance was not generally considered especially significant or interesting, nor did the basic universal fact of male dominance seem to require much explanation or illumination.

The emergence of gender or women's studies as a legitimate domain of anthropological scholarship required the elaboration of alternative conceptualizations. First, drawing heavily on the reasoning developed in the context of the Women's Liberations movements of the time, we rejected the idea that women's status and gender relationships are simply inscribed in "human nature," arguing instead that they are significantly determined by particular social or cultural arrangements. By the same token, although it was obvious that relationships between men and women, like practically anything else, are at some level unique to each individual and shaped by a complex welter of particular circumstances and sensibilities, we discovered (often in the context of the women's movement) that in this domain as many others, people's experience, expectations, judgments of themselves and others are apt to fall into discoverable patterns, explainable to some significant degree with reference to social arrangements and cultural beliefs. Understood as neither simply "natural" nor entirely individual, issues relating to the status of women and gender relationships could not only be the stuff of a social movement, but also comprised a domain having social and cultural dimensions consequential enough for anthropological investigation to be both worthwhile and feasible.

From this premise, it followed that we could expect to find considerable cross-cultural variation in gender systems and patterns of gender relations. The study of women's status or gender relations in particular societies could be expected to illuminate important social dynamics or cultural characteristics of those societies, while cross-cultural comparison of gender was likely to help sharpen our understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of this domain in human society (singular) as well as in particular societies.

The question of whether or not male dominance is a human universal was for a while a hotly debated one, at the centre of much of the anthropological literature on women and gender as we struggled between redefining or rejecting that formerly uninteresting old saw we had all been taught (cf. Quinn, 1977; Rapp, 1979; Rogers, 1978). Much of this debate involved the elaboration or reconsideration of the truisms conventionally serving as evidence of universal male dominance: a pan-human pattern of female confinement to domestic or private spheres, and of male monopolization of positions of power or prestige in public spheres. Some scholars accepted this description of a hierarchical division of the human condition, but sought to problematize it, searching for explanations in the human biological, psychic or cognitive apparatus (e.g., Ortner, 1972; Rosaldo, 1974). Others questioned whether such a dichotomy was in fact empirically well-founded or, even if it were, what cross-cultural generalizations it permitted about gendered distributions of power. Was the (scanty) ethnographic data on women sufficient to conclude that they have everywhere and in all times done little more than run—or be run by—families and households? Is the domestic sphere necessarily so clearly distinguishable from or marginal to consequential or definitive spheres of activity in all societies? How reliable is the evidence that men universally monopolize formal positions of authority, and what other forms of power might be significant in given settings? Might claims about the greater prestige of male activities simply be a reflection in some cases of the biases of anthropologists or their male informants? What, in any case, are the relationships among prestige, power and dominance?

Europeanist research contributed substantially to the latter line of argument. Working almost exclusively in rural settings organized around a domestic mode of agricultural production and largely isolated from important centres of formal political power, a number of Europeanist anthropologists argued forcefully that in such settings, the domestic sphere constituted a key locus of economic and symbolic power (e.g., Friedl, 1967). Further, access to formal political power was apt to be severely limited for the men as well as women in such settings, so that various forms of informal—often do-

mestic based—power were generally more consequential (e.g., Riegelhaupt, 1967). In this kind of setting, it was argued, the domestic sphere was by no means marginal, close association of women with household activity was not necessarily a symptom of powerlessness, and analysis of gendered distribution of power could reasonably focus on domestic loci (cf. Chinas, 1973; Wolf, 1972). In this line of argument (in which I would include my own work on the topic [Rogers, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1985]), adequate understanding of the gendered distribution of power required careful consideration of the loci and forms of power relevant to a given setting; a priori assumptions about the centrality of the domestic sphere were considered no more legitimate than a priori assumptions about its marginality.

Another line of argument, sometimes accompanying that sketched above and sometimes challenging it, served to render compatible the claim that male dominance is a widely shared characteristic of contemporary societies and the assertion that it is not a timeless or inevitable product of human nature. In this work, apparent cross-cultural similarities were explained with reference to the impact of such historical processes as colonization, state formation, industrialization, urbanization, capitalization or globalization (e.g., Boserup, 1970; Hafkin and Bay, 1976; Mintz, 1971; Nash and Safa, 1980; Rapp, 1975). Following this line of argument, understanding women's status in a given time and place required careful analysis of processes of change, and promised new insights into the dynamics of such processes.

Never resolved, the debate about the universality of male dominance was eventually abandoned on the flabby shoals of the concept of "dominance," increasingly apparent as the ethnographic record filled out. As suggested by most of the papers in this collection, there are myriad ways to define and measure power. Further, it seems quite clear that in human relations, there is no such thing as an absolutely powerless individual or category of persons, just as there is no such thing as an absolutely powerful individual or category. If what we mean by dominance is absolute power, then it is easy enough to demonstrate that a given person or category is not truly dominant or dominated after all. In the end, such demonstrations easily degenerate to facile parries against a straw man, of little interest or use. If, on the other hand, we are not so concerned with claims about absolute power or powerlessness, but rather with the various kinds of power relationships that exist among and within particular categories of persons—as is the case with the authors here—then rather more complicated and engaging questions may be posed.

The disappearance of interest in arguments about the universality of male dominance, however, seems to have been accompanied by a move away from questions about power distribution as the central issue in the anthropological study of gender. This is undoubtedly consistent with more general shifts in analytical fashions within the discipline over the past decade, including the waning of a vision of human social relations in which power maximization is necessarily a central dynamic. In light of that impression, the concern in all of the papers in this collection with the kinds and amounts of power wielded by women is particularly striking. Although the treatments of this issue here are generally more sophisticated than those found in the earlier "male dominance" literature, there are some clear parallels.

As Roseman and Kelley suggest in their introduction, the ethnography of Galicia and northern Portugal played an important role at least through the 1980s in the development of anthropological thinking about the gendered division of power. Partly because this region is one where women seemed to have access to more power than elsewhere (notably in comparison to Mediterranean societies), it drew considerable attention from anthropologists interested in this domain, yielding a body of literature that stretched our imaginations and provided considerable insights about the dynamics of gender and of power distribution. Fresh work on a topic that has been particularly associated with this region then, is certainly welcome and perhaps not so surprising. Whereas much of the earlier work was concerned to show how and why women had more power in this setting than simple-minded claims of male dominance might suggest, however, the authors here are concerned to respond to claims—no less simple-minded, I would argue—about the "absolute power" wielded by women in the region (Brøgger and Gilmore, 1997). The reintroduction of the straw man of absolute domination/subordination models of gender relations—albeit in curiously transposed form—carries the risk of leading back to ultimately banal demonstrations of the limits on any kind of power. The authors here offer instead nuanced analyses of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the various kinds of power to which women in the region have access. It is interesting to note that while the earlier literature generally aimed to undermine the notion of absolute male dominance by considering the forms of power available to putatively subordinated women, most of the articles here aim to challenge the notion of absolute female dominance by considering the constraints experienced by the putatively dominant gender.

A more novel strategy is consideration of the long-standing popular stereotype in Spain, referred to in several of the articles here and treated in more detail elsewhere by Kelley (1994), of Galician women as unusually powerful and their menfolk as especially weak. The question of why scholars and others make (and challenge) such claims strikes me as a fruitful one, partly because it offers a stimulating corrective to the somewhat flat-footed empiricism characterizing our scholarship of a generation ago.

The focus of most of these papers on women's lives begs questions about the relationship between older "women's studies," and more current "gender studies." It seems to me useful to distinguish the study of gender as a principal of social organization or order from the study of one or another social category defined in terms of gender (e.g., women), just as the study of social class stratification is not quite identical to the study of the working class. Our field of inquiry began as "women's studies," because, we argued, our understanding of more general issues relating to gender was necessarily limited until we knew as much about women as about men. The more recent shift in nomenclature to "gender studies" would seem to mark the end of that old absence of women from the ethnographic record, and the resultant possibility of thinking in more sophisticated ways about gender, as well as a perhaps less salutary loss of interest in the study of specifically women's experience. In this collection as elsewhere there has been a curious conceptual slide such that "gender" seems most frequently to be used as a synonym for "women." Gender studies often turns out to be primarily concerned with the study of women; despite the new name, it would appear that interest in the study of women has not, after all, been displaced, but that the study of gender remains illusive. As the papers in this collection demonstrate, it certainly remains valuable to learn about the changing experience of women in the various northern Iberian settings considered here, the kinds of constraints they perceive, and some of the ways they negotiate these. If their male counterparts remain in the shadows, appearing primarily as the fathers, husbands, sons and brothers of the women of primary interest, there is no doubt that the insights we gain into the texture of women's lives is useful indeed. The study of women's experience of power and powerlessness, however, is not quite the same enterprise as the study of how gender works as a principle of social classification and order. The latter, it seems to me, would require comparable illumination of men's perceptions of themselves and others, the constraints they experience as men and their ways of managing these. My point is not that gender necessarily *should* finally displace women as a focus of study, but that it remains useful to distinguish between the two.

The focus on family relationships, household economies and agriculture evident in this collection of papers, also seems to be a characteristic shared with earlier work in women's studies. Part of the argument we elaborated a generation ago has, it would seem, become self-evident: the domestic sphere is not necessarily marginal or uninteresting with respect to social relations of power, and may in fact be a key locus for understanding women's lives and the gendered division of power. Equally important, however, are the ideas that the significance of the domestic may be variable across cultural or social settings, and that in some settings women may not be engaged primarily in domestic matters. That is, it cannot be taken for granted that either women's lives or patterns of gendered power distribution can necessarily be adequately or best captured through a domestic lens. The papers in this collection offer insight into the ways that women's experience within their families and households has been shaped by such significant processes of change in Galicia and Northern Portugal as the decline of subsistence agriculture, the increasing importance of cash and extra-domestic labour, new forms of migration, urbanization. But precisely because such processes are shown here to impinge upon family relationships and on the significance of the household as a social and economic unit, it is important to situate the domestic sphere with respect to other loci in terms of its relative importance to the experience of women and other actors in these settings, and perhaps to attend to interactions and experience in other arenas of significance.

Finally, a number of the papers in this collection draw on life history material, offering an effective corrective to overly formulaic or categorical claims about the sources of women's power and contours of their experience. The stories they tell of individual lives remind us that the normative rules governing social relationships—including those shaping women's status and power—are themselves ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations and manipulations in practice. They also remind us that real life is a great deal more complicated than simple recital of such rules might suggest. The actual experience of the women we meet here does not fit neatly into clear patterns explainable by simple reference to inheritance patterns, the division of labour, or other variables that have conventionally been used to explain the gendered division of power in this region. Consistent with current styles of analysis emphasizing the multiplicity of human experience, the lesson is a valuable one. It is also

reminiscent of the passage from Lowie's *Primitive Society*, quoted (with the exception of the final sentence) in Evans-Pritchard's comments on the imponderables shaping gender relations:

> The conditions involved in the relations of men and women are many-sided and it is dangerous to overweight one particular phase of them. Least of all should excessive significance be attached to theory. Theory may and does affect practice, but often only in moderate degree . . . [I]t is important to ascertain what customary or written law and philosophic theory have to say on feminine rights and obligations. But it is more important to know whether social practice conforms to theory or leaves it halting in the rear, as it so frequently does. The exaggerated weight often ascribed to abstract propositions and legal enactments is part of that perverse rationalism which has so often befuddled the understanding of students of human institutions and human psychology. (Lowie, 1961 [1920]: 188-189)

And indeed, pushed to its logical limits, this line of argument leads us back to Evans-Pritchard's "imponderables": if gender relations or women's experience are ultimately determined by the infinite details defining the specificities of each individual's life, then these domains are not, after all, amenable to social or cultural analysis and we as anthropologists have little legitimate claim to address them. The challenge remains to capture the complexities of women's power and experience, without returning to a conception rendering the tools of our trade irrelevant for understanding them.

Particularly because the papers in this collection return to an issue of central importance to the anthropology of women as it emerged a generation ago, they offer impressive testimony to the dramatic development of this domain in the interim. This development is marked in part by changing ideas about which premises can be taken for granted and which require explication or challenge. As the field continues to move in new directions or profitably revisit old ones, its underlying premises will no doubt continue to be reshuffled. A backward look from time to time may help to sharpen and refine the questions asked in the present. This look back leads me to suggest that it may now be useful to carefully reconsider the close associations that have come to be habitually drawn by scholars in this field between gender, women and family. Without a doubt, some kinds of questions (e.g., about women's experience of power) can best be addressed by focussing on one or another gender group, but other kinds of questions (e.g., about gendered patterns of power distribution) require analysis across gender lines. Similarly, it is certain that the domestic sphere is everywhere a consequential and potentially interesting locus for expressions and experience of power within and between gender groups. At the same time, in the contemporary world, it is arguably less likely than ever that either women's experience or gender relationships are necessarily fully—or even principally—contained in that domain. Finally, a word of caution may be in order about travelling too far down the road toward those imponderables that would dissolve the field in quandaries beyond our competence or interest as anthropologists. And to be wary of straw men along the way.

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