The New Anthropology of Sexuality

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Popular images of our discipline often feature a focus on sexuality as one of the defining elements of anthropology. These impressions are only partly true, because there have been substantial periods of time when relatively little was written on the topic. Nonetheless, sexuality has been an intellectual concern of the anthropological tradition since the Age of the Enlightenment. It was involved in the formation of representations about "primitive others" in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries and was also crucial in the construction of images of difference within metropolitan societies. The questioning of such representations has formed an important part of the modern and postmodern history of anthropology.

In our recent book, *Irregular Connections*, we traced the appearances and disappearances of sexuality in the history of anthropology in Britain and North America. Ideas of sexuality played a critical role in the formation of the fictions of primitive promiscuity which underpinned many of the evolutionary schemata of the 19th century. In the late evolutionary period Edward Westermarck (1906-08 vol. II) attacked ideas of primitive promiscuity. He also discussed homosexuality in Morocco and concluded that homosexual desire could be culturally acquired. In the late 1920s Malinowski (1987) and Mead (1928) showed how the Trobrianders and Samoans offered a model of premarital heterosexual freedom which Westerners might—with due caution—wish to emulate. In the 1930s Isaac Schapera (1966) and Raymond Firth (1957) discussed sexual behaviour among the Tswana and the Tikopia. Then for about 40 years sexuality retreated from centre stage in our discipline, because anthropologists sought scientific respectability and therefore eschewed topics which were personal, not "serious" and uneasily transcended the nature–culture boundary.

In the middle of the 1970s the anthropology of sexuality came out of the cold. Its return marked ruptures with the past as well as continuities. In the postcolonial era anthropology's focus shifted from the periphery to the

metropolis so that our sexualities as well as the sexualities of "others" came under scrutiny. In addition there was increasing attention to gays and lesbians within Western societies and to same sex sexualities and "third genders" elsewhere. These ethnographic and theoretical trends reflected the convergence of many changes and dispositions: the personal *positioning* of the ethnographer in an era which no longer denied that ethnographers participated in the social fields they described; the advent in practice of the feminist second wave and gay and lesbian liberation; new sexual prescriptions and proscriptions in both metropolis and postcolony; Lacanian and Foucauldian notions of gender and sexuality and latterly the emergence of queer theory.

The connection between debates about morality, ideas of equality, hierarchy and difference and anthropological ideas about sexuality is not new. It dates back well before Mead and Malinowski to the first foreshadowings and the very early decades of our discipline. For example, in the 18th century Diderot, an anthropologically minded philosopher, idealized the sexual generosity of semi-fictional Polynesians in order to criticize the proprieties of his age (Diderot 1989). Edward Long and Charles White, both polygenists, propagated popular legends about the genitalia of blacks (Lyons and Lyons 2004:29-40). The theorists of mother-right—Morgan, Bachofen and McLennan—conjured "primitive promiscuity" as the zero point of morality from which Victorian society had thankfully evolved (Lyons and Lyons 2004:73-80). Richard Burton praised polygamy in Utah and Southern Nigeria in order to express his disdain for Victorian prudery (Burton 1861). Westermarck, Ellis and Crawley criticized the notion of primitive promiscuity in ways that may not have been accidental, because they were among the late Victorian and Edwardian critics of the sexual status quo (see Lyons and Lyons 2004:100-130). In other words the *content* of the nexus between moralities, hierarchy, sexualities and anthropology has varied greatly; however, the constant has been the *form* of the relationship which has served as an armature for disparate power modalities. In *Irregular Connections* we described that relationship as conscription, by which we mean:

> the deployment of data about sexual discourses and practices among "others" in discourses of power, morality, pleasure and therapy in the cultures where anthropological texts have predominantly been read and produced. Conscription may imply the reaffirmation of existing social hierarchies, or it may involve what Marcus and Fischer (1986) call "cultural critique." [Lyons and Lyons 2004:18]

While our debt to Foucault and Said is obvious, for better or worse this was our own discipline-specific variation on their grand themes. It is also obvious that some forms of conscription are acceptable to contemporary academic sensibilities and others are not.

If sexuality is an "especially dense transfer point for relations of power," as Foucault (1980:103) opined, surely that principle should hold cross-culturally. In other words, anthropology which is produced by discourses of power in "our own" culture may be involved in the description and theorizing of different transfer points of power in other cultures. This may take forms which combine signs that mediate terrains both familiar and unfamiliar to us. Ager's discussion of incest among the Ptolemaic rulers of Hellenistic Egypt over six generations is particularly interesting in this regard. Ptolemaic incest appears to have been an exaggerated imitation of the dynastic practices of the former indigenous rulers of Pharaonic Egypt. The author who is a classicist details seven cases of brother-sister marriage (one of which may have been a love match), two cases of uncle-niece marriage, two or three cases of cousin marriage, a couple of cases of exogamous dynastic alliance, a rape, several murders within the royal family, immense corpulence (in the case of Ptolemy VIII) and extraordinary extravagance.

Incest is a topic that remained a subject of debate within anthropology throughout long periods when little was said about sexuality in general, albeit the discussion was curiously disembodied. Ager reviews a number of the classic theories including instinctive and learned aversion, some sociobiological ideas about inclusive fitness and hypergyny as well as the never ending debate about the effects of inbreeding and concludes that none of them fit the facts of this particular case. For example, the question of diminished sexual attraction resulting from innate aversion or excess familiarity does not apply to marriages where love is often the least consideration, particularly if one's new spouse has just murdered one's offspring! Her conclusion is that for the Ptolemies, "incest takes its place as only one component in an integrated set of liminal behaviours symbolizing power and grounded in a philosophy of excess." The precise point of these actions is that they constitute a fundamental breach of basic taboos covering social behaviour, a demonstration that the powerful, like gods, are not subject to mortal rules. They embrace *tryphē*, excess, rather than *sōphrosynē*, which is temperance and self-control.

Ager's argument is strong because she is able to provide a context which makes Ptolemaic excess comprehensible. A similar attention to detail both anthropological and historical is provided by Marc Epprecht whose

remarkable recent book, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Epprecht 2004), revealed a wealth of data on same sex sexualities among the Shona and their neighbours. Epprecht raises issues of which many Africans and Africanists are aware. They came to the world's attention with the growing AIDS crisis which involves all forms of sexual activity and much besides. Robert Mugabe's decision to close the exhibit of books mounted by Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair reflected his belief that homosexuality was disgusting and was an un-African practice introduced by foreigners. We have ourselves noted similar beliefs among some Southern Nigerians and Kenyans. Such assertions have a precedent in the long but not total silence about same sex sexualities in Africa on the part of European colonizers, explorers, missionaries and anthropologists. With rare exceptions (e.g., some remarks by Junod and by Monica Wilson) social anthropologists said nothing about African homosexuality until the 1970s when Merriam wrote about the institution of the *kitesha* (a berdache like figure) among the Basongye and Evans-Pritchard finally published forty-year old material on Zande homosexuality for an anthropological audience. Epprecht conclusively reveals the assertions of power and hierarchical assumptions that create such silences—if acts and discourses about sex are concerned with transfer points of power, the same may be said of silence. Nineteenth-century racists who portrayed Africans as debauched and oversexed viewed uncontrolled heterosexuality as the zero point of progress. Homosexuality was regarded as a symptom of decadence, as opposed to primitivity, because of its presence in the Ancient World and some contemporary Islamic societies (and presumably because of its presence in the Victorian world too). African homosexuality, where it occurred, had to be the product of diffusion. Missionaries were generally too prudish, too busy with heterosexual "sins" like polygyny, and/or too worried about upsetting potential converts or potential donors to address the topic. Colonial governments were presumably embarrassed by institutions such as mine marriage which their policies facilitated. Early African nationalists, such as Kenyatta, who wished to refashion an acceptable cultural history for their peoples insisted on the foreignness of homosexuality and anthropologists who wished to gain their sympathy succumbed to pressures "to corral Africans into a reassuring nationalist allegory of exclusive heterosexuality."

Epprecht's work, here and in *Hungochani,* reminds us that the category label "natural" can be stigmatizing as well as exemplary. The alleged absence of same-sex eroticism was consistent with the image of Africans as the ultimate *Naturvolk,* with all of the ambiguities of racialized distancing and desire for a less problematic, more virile past which such a label implied. In Northern Europe in the late 19th century increasing attention was focussed on homosexuality which was marked as an "identity," a state of being rather than as events in people's lives, by medical sexologists, legislators, homophobes and by self-identified "Urnings" (whether or not it had been an identity before is an issue we cannot address in this space). There were debates at this time as to whether homosexuality was "natural" or "unnatural." Havelock Ellis thought that inverts were statistically uncommon but were created by nature. Because homosexuality was innate it could not be cured. It was wrong to persecute homosexuals. Edward Westermarck, who was sympathetic toward homosexuals, thought that homosexuality could be acquired in same sex environments such as Islamic schools (see Lyons and Lyons 2004:128-129). Descriptors like "innate" and "acquired," "natural" and "learned," are still contested concepts a century later, and their significance depends on the social context in which they are expressed.

Constance Sullivan-Blum, in her article "'The Natural Order of Creation': Naturalizing Discourses in the Christian Same-Sex Marriage Debate," explores the strategies employed by Christian conservatives, Christian liberals, and gay and lesbian people of varying religious persuasions, to support their positions on whether churches should recognize same sex marriage. Her analysis reveals that some relatively liberal heterosexual members of mainline congregations (including some ministers) as well as LGBT church members thought that homosexuality was natural, that "we no more choose our sexuality than we chose our genitals," and that gender was an expression of biological sex. God clearly does not intend to punish people for acting according to the way he created them. In contrast many evangelical church members felt that homosexuality was a voluntary sin, and as such was the product of decadence and corruption which gays and lesbians spread like a contagion. This is a kind of sexual constructionism, though obviously one with an opposite valence to the constructionism espoused by queer theorists and other critical theorists of sexuality.

Whether we label them as constructionists or essentialists, Sullivan-Blum's gay and lesbian subjects and most writers on sexuality during the last thirty years, including both Lacan and Foucault, have clung to the idea of sexual identity as a state of being. Queer theorists, including Judith Butler, have preferred to regard sexuality as a series of events involving role playing. In this model, "doing" sex is foregrounded and the notion of fixed sex-

ual identity is problematized. It could be argued that performance models are more suited to certain types of sexual practice than they are to others. Margot Weiss makes a strong claim for the applicability of Butler's insights to the practitioners of sadomasochism, dominance/submission and bondage whom she has studied in San Francisco. BDSM practitioners may (or may not) combine BDSM practice with gay, lesbian or bisexual actions, selecting between a plethora of choices, shopping for and selecting a range of equipment and props—a pastiche reflecting the fractured individual subjectivities often associated with late capitalism. They have managed to routinize their play, much as amateur photographers, audiophiles and political activists do, devouring internet catalogues, meeting for "munches" and *working* at their hobby. Weiss's analysis reminds one of Luhrmann's (1989) descriptions of neo-pagans in London whose sense of mastery and commitment increases with each hour they devote to magical practice.

With the possible exception of Ager, all of our contributors are very much concerned with the contemporary politics of sexuality. Epprecht's article is important to anyone who wishes to understand debates about AIDS in Africa, just as Sullivan-Blum's article sheds light on the North American debate on same-sex marriage. However, a large body of recent literature falls within the ambit of applied anthropology, being devoted to applying anthropological insights directly to global social problems such as trafficking of women, AIDS and clitoridectomy. Although we did receive one interesting submission on AIDS, it was not revised in time for this issue. Cole, in an article on services offered to Nigerian prostitutes by a program in Palermo, argues that projects of this kind may achieve success in harm reduction while failing to persuade substantial numbers of women to leave the streets. Reducing the harm suffered by those engaging in high-risk behaviours, such as prostitutes or drug addicts, as opposed to effecting cessation of such activities, is increasingly being accepted as a realistic goal of intervention projects. Cole provides a multi-causal analysis of the difficulty of dissuading trafficked women from prostitution, even when they are willing to accept assistance from those who would prefer to "rescue" them. Among the issues Cole raises is the nature of "consent" on the one hand and "trafficking" on the other. Most of the young Nigerian women he writes about came to Palermo voluntarily, knowing they were destined for prostitution. They might nonetheless be described as "trafficked," insofar as they were mostly unaware of the coercive and exploitative conditions in which they would work and insofar as physical and supernatural threats against them and their families are employed to keep them on the streets. Nonetheless, poverty and lack of opportunity at home and lack of other opportunities abroad makes many prostitutes willing to continue in their profession even after they have paid off their debts to the traffickers. In some cases, former prostitutes have become "madams" who control and assist in the exploitation of newly arrived women. The issue of "voluntary" participation in a situation of this sort is obviously a complex one, as Cole makes clear. Cole also argues convincingly that providing medical assistance, free condoms and other social supports is something worth doing, and that part of the responsibility for "trafficking" rests with the countries which receive (and provide the demand for) trafficked persons while refusing them legal status, police protection, basic amenities like housing and, above all, access to alternative employment.

The variety of topics covered by articles received in response to a general call for work on the anthropology of sexuality reveals what a complex topic sexuality has become. Indeed, defining sex and gender has itself become a flourishing enterprise. It may be that there is no concise, universally applicable definition of these terms. Articles in this volume have variously explored the issues of power, pleasure, survival, labour, consumption, symbolic meanings, emotion and agency, which minimally must be considered in working toward an understanding of such an important part of human experience. Such holistic understandings are what anthropologists pride themselves on.

We have noted that silence is as important as discourse. Significantly, the new anthropology of sexuality has rarely scrutinized the sexuality of the heterosexual, procreating couple who appear to comply with Western social norms. Foucault suggests that in the sexual discourses which began to emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries multiple domains of deviance were identified, classified and examined (though the objects of such study were rarely allowed to speak with their own voice), but that "the legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion" (Foucault 1980:38). Several of the articles in this volume are in the tradition of critical sexual theory, which seeks to problematize the middle by writing from the periphery. As yet, work which breaks the privileged silence of the self-defined centre is relatively scarce in the anthropology of sexuality and represents an area of inquiry which needs to be developed.

We are grateful for we have learned from the authors represented in this volume. We hope their readers will share our gratitude and that some will be inspired to further exploration.

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