
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Maria Lepowsky, *Fruit of the Motherland: Gender in an Egalitarian Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Pp. 383, illus., maps, bibliography, index. US\$18.50 paperback.

Raymond C. Kelly, *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. Pp. 604, illus., index. US\$28.95 paperback.

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Expanding the Feminist Debate

IN *FRUIT OF THE MOTHERLAND*, Maria Lepowsky provides a fine-grained description of key social interactions on the island of Vanatinai in the Louisiade Archipelago. Her meticulous documentation of male/female activities in myth, daily life, and ritualized exchange makes the book a must read for anyone interested in questions of female power and authority. In the following, I will discuss Lepowsky's ethnography in the context of what Marilyn Strathern calls "the feminist debate." My aim is not to detract from Lepowsky's contribution but to use it as a platform to point out some of the flaws in the feminist debate as it has developed in anthropology and to suggest ways in which the debate might be expanded in keeping with recent developments in feminist theory.

According to Marilyn Strathern, rather than seeking "constantly fresh

conceptualizations of social life,” feminist scholarship “seeks for only one,” namely “all the ways in which it would make a difference to the worlds we know to acknowledge women’s as well as men’s perspectives” (1988:22). Taking the perspective of women means that feminists study women qua women in relation to men qua men. Related to this tendency to totalize gender in terms of male versus female is an analogous move to conflate sex, gender, and social relations. Thus, Strathern refers to “the feminist insight that in dealing with relations between the sexes, one is dealing with social relations at large” (ibid.:35). The social relations of greatest interest to feminists, which Strathern cites, are questions regarding universal female subordination.

Rosaldo and Lamphere began their introduction to the groundbreaking *Women, Culture, and Society* by noting that the first question arising in the anthropological study of women would be “whether there are societies, unlike our own, in which women are publicly recognized as equal to or more powerful than men” (1974:2). Failing to find evidence of such societies, despite Leacock’s work on egalitarian societies that they cite, they concluded that while “all agree that there are societies in which women have achieved considerable social recognition and power,” everywhere “we find that women are excluded from certain crucial economic or political activities, that their roles as wives and mothers are associated with fewer powers and prerogatives than are the roles of men. It seems fair to say then, that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated, and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life” (ibid.:3).

The rationale for this conclusion is articulated in the first three chapters of the book, written by Rosaldo, Chodorow, and Ortner respectively. Lamphere explained recently that these contributions were placed together “to give the book a theoretical coherence” (1995:97). At the time, some of the other contributors, myself in particular, objected strongly to the idea that there could be any coherence so early in the game in the absence of a solid body of ethnographic data on women’s activities. I now understand (and probably understood then, too, which is why I objected so vehemently) that the coherence came not so much from the evidence (which would explain why Leacock’s work was discounted) but from the fit between the conceptual framework posited in these opening chapters and a genre of social thinking having considerable historical depth.

Rosaldo, Chodorow, and Ortner accept the traditional anthropological assumption that human social behavior takes place in ethnically bounded social units with certain universal structural properties. Like the political philosophers of the past, they document subordination by focusing on the

natural functions of women in the domestic domain of childbearing and -rearing. This approach is tantamount to reducing gender to social relations structured according to a model of biological sex differences. Thus, Rosaldo aligns gender differences with a preconceived universal domestic/public split in the social arena imposed by biological sex differences; Ortner followed suit with a presumed culture/nature split in the symbolic arena; and Chodorow made growing up male or female a function of the mother-child bond, from which males must separate physically and psychologically in their journey toward the public domain of culture.

Okin's analysis of women's place in Western political thought beginning with Plato and Aristotle helps put into historical perspective some of the underlying assumptions on which such conclusions are based (1979). Plato and Aristotle conceived of the Athenian polity as a bounded social unit separated into domestic and public spheres. The misogyny of Athenian culture and the fact that wives were the property of their husbands, along with uncertainty about paternity, were some of the factors contributing to the rigid distinction of a private, family life separated off from the realm of public life. Okin points out that this distinction led these and other philosophers "to the exaggeration of women's biological differences from men, to the perception of women as primarily suited to fulfill special 'female' functions within the home, and consequently to the justification of the monopoly by men of the whole outside world" (ibid.:275).

According to Okin, "the only place in political philosophy where women are . . . included on the same terms as men is Plato's guardian class in the *Republic*" (1979:274). As outlined by Okin, Plato's schema suggests that the central assumption underlying the Western definition of equality is that for X to be equal to Y, X must be the same as Y. Thus, to put women of the guardian class in a position of equality with men, Plato proposed reducing the natural differences between the sexes by abolishing the private sphere of life and controlling reproduction, the socialization of childrearing, and all domestic functions so that male and female guardians could be both similarly educated and similarly employed.

In other words, Western political philosophy makes natural differences synonymous with unequal. Applying this tenet to today's world, short of conceiving babies in test tubes, gestating them in incubators, and raising them in state-run institutions, women cannot be equal to men. Public men can be fathers but public women cannot be mothers, because they must be like men. Fathers can join other men in the public arena but mothers cannot be their equals. Rather than talking about equal opportunity and granting individuals equal access to valued resources, our definitions of equality stress equal outcomes.

In all fairness, a great deal has changed since the publication of *Women, Culture, and Society*. Rosaldo abandoned the rigid sociological dichotomy of domestic/public. In a more nuanced discussion of “gender hegemonies” that can coexist with contradictory, less pervasive ideologies, Ortner seems to have given up on the nature/culture split (1990). Additionally, since the 1970s the extensive ethnographic research carried out by anthropologists interested in the woman question has yielded a number of intriguing particularistic models. Many of the articles in *Beyond the Second Sex* (Sanday and Goodenough 1990), for example, pose ethnographic and analytic challenges to assumptions that in the past supported categorical judgments of equality/inequality in favor of “addressing the conflict, variability, and contradictions that we all have encountered in ethnographic field research” (ibid.:1).

Nevertheless, the old paradigm persists. Lepowsky is careful to focus on all the roles played by women on the island of Vanatinai—not just on those related to reproduction and childrearing. At the outset, she notes that Vanatinai is “a society in which there is no ideology of male superiority, and one in which women have the same kinds of personal autonomy and control of the means of production as men” (p. xii). To support this contention she provides a convincing description of big-women as well as big-men, female power and authority in exchange, and female control of the very public and culturally salient mortuary ritual.

Lepowsky wades perilously into the old quagmire when she compares male with female activities. For example, after describing big-women and big-men in the system of inter- and intrainland exchange, she mentions the “observable fact that more men than women become prominent in ritualized exchange” (p. 35). Along the same lines, in her discussion of ancestors and spirits she suggests that there is a “slight but perceptible gender asymmetry in the supernatural balance of power” because there are more male supernaturals (despite the fact that the major supernaturals of popular consciousness appear to be female) and males dominate the destructive power of sorcery (p. 166). To give her credit, however, such statements play a minor role in her overall picture and she does not reduce the asymmetry she finds to the reproductive or childrearing functions of women.

Lepowsky's foray into the balancing act inspired by the legacy of structural-functional research reminds me of Martha Macintyre's tantalizing report of female authority and autonomy on the island of Tubetube, not far from Vanatinai. After describing an ethnographic scenario that some might say is truly egalitarian, bordering on female dominance, Macintyre reaches the obligatory conclusion of much of feminist anthropology: “But Tubetube was never a matriarchy and those few women who were exclusive leaders of their lineages achieved the status by default.” In an intriguing afterthought,

which I take to be more important by far for those interested in the discourse of gender (see below), Macintyre adds that the imbalance in political parity between senior male and female leaders “is not recognized in Tubetube representations of their lineage political structure and ideally leadership is a co-operative enterprise, undertaken . . . ‘by cross-sex siblings, together’ ” (1988:186).

The problem, as I see it, is that because the doctrine of universal sexual asymmetry has achieved the status of theoretical as well as political hegemony in Western thought, feminist anthropologists feel that their work would be counted as less than scientific did they not pay it some sort of lip service. Relativism seems not to have made much of a dent in feminist anthropology, at least not the kind of relativism that would allow ethnographers to make observations about women’s lives without comparing them to a Western-defined male standard, or even to local male standards.

I was among the early feminist anthropologists who began writing on the subject of women in the early 1970s (Sanday 1973, 1974). Although I came to the subject as a cross-cultural researcher and student of George Peter Murdock, I was trained in pretty much the same intellectual tradition that other early feminists brought to their research. Although in *Female Power and Male Dominance* (Sanday 1981), I rejected the idea of universal sexual asymmetry and did not make sameness a condition of equality, I followed Murdock and White (1969) in treating the 156 societies of their standard cross-cultural sample as ethnically bounded social units that could be compared. Within the context of these units, I assumed that able-bodied adult women as a category could be said to have a status vis-à-vis adult men. There have been many justified critiques of this assumption, some of which Lepowsky summarizes (pp. x, xii, 83–84, 282). Nevertheless, the correlations I report show that a significant association of female political and economic power with mythic themes and the relative absence of male violence against women highlight the degree to which these types of gender relations not only vary cross-culturally but co-vary with predictable social conditions. The results kept me from reducing gender to asymmetric social relations imposed by biological sex differences or the reproduction of mothering.

Fifteen years later, with the benefit of eleven field trips to West Sumatra, Indonesia, to study the Minangkabau, I no longer approach the study of women as a cross-cultural researcher but as an ethnographer. Based on long-term field research, I now question the assumption that the traditional societies of anthropological research necessarily conform either to Durkheim’s notion of social solidarity or to the organic model posited by Radcliffe-Brown. In West Sumatra, for example, I found that the people who call themselves the Minangkabau are a pastiche of cultural influences, a melting pot of for-

eign immigrants who at the village level identify with a central political core, and that differences from one area to the next are best compared to the radiating spokes of a kaleidoscope.

While I am unwilling to posit a Minangkabau society, I can speak of Minangkabau sociality, by which I mean the local social and ritual networks that bind individuals identifying with Minangkabau ethnicity. Because of the diversity within the Minangkabau ethnic group, one cannot talk about female status, for the powers Minangkabau women exercise in one area may differ dramatically from those exercised in another. It is also useless to make any statements about equality or asymmetry. As informants told me over and over, as if talking to a child, in some activities females have more power and in others males do. Which sex rules (or even whether one does) is a meaningless question, as I found out by asking it too often and getting a confusing array of European-inspired lectures on the Minangkabau “matriarchate” on the one hand and self-serving disquisitions (usually from males) on male dominance on the other.

Recognizing that my feminist-inspired questions obscured my understanding of how gender operated in local Minangkabau culture, after a few years I abandoned the feminist paradigm for a discourse-centered approach to gender. By discourse-centered I mean locating the culture of Minangkabau gender in the concrete. Rather than conceiving gender as an overarching template or an inner identity, I concentrated on the publicly accessible signs of everyday life such as speech, images, myths, and rituals by which individuals perform and mark gender or have gender stamped upon them. My field data suggested that gender is best conceived not as an immutable characteristic of individuals but as a set of signs that are exploited for personal gain or that are thrust upon children to give them a sex. Based on these results I am sympathetic to Judith Butler’s argument that gender is not just “the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex,” but “the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (1990:7). To this I would add, that even after a sex is stamped on the individual, gender as a system of signs can give sexed individuals considerable room to maneuver. In West Sumatra, for example, individuals can and do play games with the signs of gender in pursuit of a variety of interests: ritual, political, economic, or sexual.

In his application of a discourse-centered approach to his fieldwork in a Brazilian Amerindian community, Greg Urban refers to the “circulation” and “fixity” of discourse (1996:10). By circulation he means discourse that achieves a wider currency “because of its effectiveness in helping a community to exist in the world” (*ibid.*). As discourse circulates it also tends to become fixed and transmitted from one generation to the next. In the field set-

ting, this raises the question of ethnohistorical research. To what extent is the discourse of today inherited from the past and under what conditions? In the case of the Minangkabau this is a very important question because of Kahn's suggestion that Minangkabau matriliney is a response to Dutch colonial agricultural policies (1993).

Turning back to Lepowsky's ethnography, I can give one example of how a discourse-centered approach might be relevant to her data. Lepowsky argues that my finding of a correlation between female-centered creation myths and female power does not hold up in her data, because the Vanatinai creation myth involves a male creator (p. 131). However, if we agree with Urban that culture is anchored in "objectively circulating discourse" (1991: 10), this creation myth would have to be deemed culturally peripheral because, as Lepowsky notes (p. 131), it is unelaborated and rarely told. Of more interest is the female-oriented myth of the origin of exchange, which Lepowsky says is the myth that is the most widely told (pp. 131, 143, 146). The association of females with custom in this myth suggests that my original finding of a significant correlation between the themes of origin myths and female power holds for Vanatinai.

To conclude this all too brief treatment, a discourse-centered approach would lead me to suggest that it is better to speak of egalitarian sociality on Vanatinai rather than of an egalitarian society because, as Lepowsky says (p. 219), "women have equal opportunities of access to the symbolic capital of prestige derived from success in exchange." This access, however, does not guarantee that the same number of women as men will pursue the opportunities open to them, nor should it, any more than the same numbers of men should be expected to accrue the same symbolic capital as women in other arenas of Vanatinai sociality.

Because of her emphasis on women's perspectives and interest in addressing with her data the assertion of universal sexual asymmetry, Lepowsky's ethnography falls within the feminist debate as described by Strathern, while my refusal to weigh male against female in my own fieldwork or to reduce social relations to a putative sex/gender system would count me out. However, the feminist debate in and outside of anthropology is expanding. Gradually, gender is being dethroned as an immutable characteristic of individuals and sexual asymmetry is less persuasive as a conceptual framework for framing social relations (see, for example, articles in di Leonardo 1991; Sanday and Goodenough 1990). This more pliable approach frees women from the totalizing control of gender constructs. The new trend is both feminist and good anthropology: feminist in its attention to women and good anthropology in its attention to variation. Through such an approach we as anthropologists are able to contribute accounts of women negotiating, con-

testing, exercising, and holding power as autonomous agents and individuals rather than as dependents or subordinates of men. Conceived in this fashion, Lepowsky's ethnography helps to expand the feminist debate while remaining faithful to the task of anthropology.

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