

Nature, Culture, Gender (1980) symposium

May 5 2016

*These were notes written in advance of the event. They began of course with my thanks to Sarah and Sara for the series, and the occasion. I had really enjoyed last year's event at Goldsmiths, and it was pleasure to be meeting up again in Cambridge, despite its focus!*

Cannot talk for the others in the book (*Nature, culture and gender*). We came together with different agendas – and to some extent have gone different ways. Indeed it is for all kinds of reasons that the other contributors cannot be here. I take this as a moment to recall the three who have since died – Carol MacCormack [d. 1998] and Olivia Harris [d. 2009] tragically before their time, and Jane Goodale [d. 2008] in the fullness of time.

Carol and I in fact had somewhat different issues we wanted to air. She was a wonderfully vigorous and inspiring person, holding an Assistant lectureship at Cambridge 1974-9, coming from Franklin & Marshall College and on her way to the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and SOAS [London], before returning to the States and Bryn Mawr. I had recently returned from Papua New Guinea in 1976, and had a bye-fellowship at Girton. It just happened that in 1977 we both went to an ASA conference on socialization, and that gave us a moment of joint illumination. Other writing was in our minds. Shirley Ardener's *Perceiving Women* (1975) had just been published, with Edwin's germinal paper, and Sherry Ortner had made her famous intervention in Lamphere and Rosaldo's book *Woman, culture and Society* (1974), to which Carol had also contributed a chapter.

As you will know, from the midst of teaching, Carol wanted to take on the theoretical agenda that Lévi-Strauss's work was generating in numerous contexts; my own concern seems to have been with the consequences of our analytical vocabulary for ethnographic description, in which I enlarge on the ideological motivation to produce binaries or dichotomies out of a shifting matrix of evaluations -- and in particular the work that a binary conception of gender did in holding such constructions momentarily in place. [I also see, in retrospect, that I was taken with the imputed *relations* between categories – not just the question of different domains but of the relations between them. Well, that has returned after all this time as something of an obsession.]

One of the pleasures in going back to the book is to realize the extent to which Carol and I had constructed it to deal simultaneously with ethnographically-based exemplifications of diverse aspects of gender thinking apropos the nature-culture divide *and* with how we might understand the historical embeddedness of that divide within European thought. Appreciating, for example, that we are dealing with concepts derived from shifting polemics, and ideologically motivated language didn't just come from me – it was there as a language of challenge in the French C18 for instance, and in the medical-scientific material Ludmilla Jordanova discussed. This in turn did not just provide a critique of specific concepts in anthropological use, but opened up the horizon to complexities elsewhere, not least that of gender.

There are numerous contemporary counterparts. One such counterpart to the n-c debates that still gets called by its older name – nature and nurture – can be seen in current debates over genetics and epigenetics. Margaret Lock and Gissl Palsson have just published a short book on this very subject (*Can Science resolve the nature / nurture debate?*) – which from a feminist perspective returns feminist insights, we might say, to fields they have also long occupied: wider issues of how we perceive the exceptionalism of the human species. That such a book has to be written shows something of the hydra-headed nature of the way ‘we’ organize concepts – no sooner dispelled in one sphere, they crop up in another.

What endures, then, should be of interest. This binary simply won't go away. Incredulous now at our naivety I think we – Carol and I -- had somehow thought we might be laying something to rest. Not on your nelly! There are clearly whole concatenations of concepts out there, entangling one another in deeply complex and overlapping ways, which mean we can go on extracting apparently powerful and persuasive-sounding binaries out of them. These matrices suck in any amount of empirical information and spew it out as ‘nature and culture’, again and again. (Which makes me think there might be more going for *Before and After Gender* than I had imagined, though that work barely begins to describe the phenomenon.) But I leave you with the thought that in some areas perhaps ‘male and female’ has actually made more headway – or at least that feminist thinking has been able to leave this binary behind.

Let me end with a couple of memories from the time when the book was in process. First was sitting in the CUP [Cambridge University Press] office with Pat Williams, the commissioning editor, and trying to convince her that a book on the topic of ‘nature, culture and gender’ might

be of contemporary interest. It took quite a bit of doing I think. Well, with your present interest the boot is on the other foot so to speak – you have convinced me it is worth going back to.

Secondly, and vividly, I recall the strength derived from the co-editorship. Precisely because Carol and I were on slightly different wave-lengths, and on crucial occasions in different body time. So when one of us flagged and was about to *give up*, the other *kept up* the pace, and vice versa of course. That made a huge impression on me – and it was a very warming lesson. Well, here her figure is magnified, so to speak, in you all. – In Sara and Sarah for imagining this brilliant series, and keeping these issues open in the new institutional configurations they have created at Goldsmiths and Cambridge; in the speakers for their insights and illuminations; and in everyone else here for their contributions this afternoon. Thank you for keeping up the pace!