

## **GENDER AND SEXUALITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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### **Summary**

The focus on sexual lives and gendered relationship among people of varying cultural groups have long been incorporated in the scientific study of what it means to be human – more commonly known as anthropology. This is not to suggest, however, that the meaning of gender and sexuality as core concepts in human life has remained constant. To the contrary, what the early anthropological ethnographies of the twentieth century noted as significant about the diversity of sexual life of humans, through comparative fieldwork among the natives, may be viewed in contrast to much of the contemporary debates on gender and sexuality.

Significant changes in politics of knowing have informed and challenged principles of knowing about human sexual life and gendered relationships across academia, through social activisms and everyday life choices and practices of people in an interconnect world of ours. What remains persistent throughout, since about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the importance of marking the boundaries between categories that separate us while simultaneously mark us as a distinct unit within our larger communities. How are we identified as sexual beings and who measures our gendered corporeal life against an ethical grid toward human worth has fueled much of the theoretical and political movements in anthropological study of gender and sexuality.

The cross-pollination between feminisms since around 1900, the queer movement of the recent decades, and the numerous critical theoretical interventions on the question of difference (race, class, corporeal ability, age, gender, sex, nationality) have strengthened by bringing to question many of the earlier assumptions within the discipline. In what follows, some of the pivotal events and critiques that have informed the development of the anthropology of gender and sexuality are offered to provide a clearer understanding on the process of knowledge production on the topic.

## **Introduction**

When the white learned men of the European academy (e.g. EB Tylor, Theodor Waitz, JG Frazer, LH Morgan) began to organize their collective critical gaze on the written accounts of encounters with the “primitive” peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the armchair-anthropology), the ideological sundown had already begun to cast a shadow on the colonialist expansions across the globe. The alluring vision of a modern world built on notions of equality and liberty, which had for so long justified the “civilizing” missions and the rhetoric of “manifest destiny,” no longer sufficed.

In its most basic form, anthropology studies what it means to be human. Anthropologists examine how different communities of people give meaning to life and how they evaluate human activities and ideas. Anthropologists approach to the study of humans is based on the basic principle that humans are complex beings, thus careful deliberation on what it means to be human, requires examination of people from multiple angles. In other words, the complexity of human mind and the vast possibility for human action, has made anthropology, from its inception, an integrative discipline reaching across multiple areas of science and knowledge formation, ranging from humanities and philosophical studies to physical sciences and technologies, through time and across geographies. Perhaps this is most evident in the etymology of the term, where *Anthropos*, meaning the human being (ancient Greek) merges with the word, *Logos*, which could best be translated as “the ground for” or “an account of” to signify the principle of knowledge and knowing about the humankind.

Practically a household terminology, gender in reference to socially ascribed roles that everyone is to perform based on their perceived sexual identity, is a relatively new concept coinciding with the development of anthropological scholarship. On its most basic level, gender is the means to differentiate between people’s social statuses based on a collective perception of their biological sexual capacities. The more contemporary view of gender refrains from fixed categorization of the masculine in opposition to and as a more complete form to the feminine, instead emphasizing the fluidity of gender expressions and sexualities as they intersect with other similarly significant socio-cultural realities, such as race, economic power, age, corporeal abilities, geopolitical locations and more. Once limited to the dichotomy between the “two sexes,” the social and cultural construction of the masculine subject and feminine bodies have been revisited by several generations of scholars with diverse backgrounds in both anthropology as well as from across multiple disciplines.

In what follows, what remains most relevant perhaps is the interweaving of ideas in and/or out of anthropological circles that have helped develop theories of gender and

sexual culture within the discipline. Without getting stuck on a linear history of anthropological thought on gender, a brief examination of major turning points in theoretical and political developments around question of gender, sexuality, body, difference, agency and voice – to name a few – will help illustrate the significance of the discourse on these topics and their relation to power.

### **1.1. What Does Anthropology of Gender Examine?**

Anthropology, as a scientific inquiry into humanity, and the study of gender, as a critical examination of social and cultural norms about human sexuality, have a shared focal point – that is the study of power. On its broadest scope, anthropology offers a critical gaze on questions of difference, inclusions and exclusion of people, and culturally significant processes of marking the “*Other*” among humankind. Likewise, gender studies emerged from a political reality of exclusion of portions of the population based on their perceived non-conforming sexual identities and roles. Men and women are socialized from early days in life and are expected to perform in a particular manner “suitable” for their respective gender. Historically, those who deviated from such prescription often faced severe disciplinary reactions from being ostracized by public to being placed in “reform” institutions. Only in recent decades and not in all countries of the world, do we witness people who come to challenge such extreme disciplinary measures systematically practiced against those identified with alternative sexualities and gender trespass. The history of political movements towards inclusion and equality has been intertwined with the development of thought since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that revisited ideals from the age of Enlightenment centered on the human to place her (the human subject) in the modern world. Equality in social, economical, political, and cultural domains that has been the defining trait of all stages of feminist and gender movements since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the West, speaks directly to and has benefited from the proliferation of anthropological thought and ethnographic findings of the same time period.

Anthropology studies gender both as a practice and as a politically viable frame to examine representation of people’s agency and access to power in everyday life. Anthropology of gender and sexuality, thus, is an interdisciplinary field that weaves between historical events (i.e. women’s liberation movements of the 1960’s and 70’s), socio-cultural movements (i.e. the rise of counter-culture politics in the US) and theoretical flagships (i.e. Feminisms and Queer Theory), that contribute to the formation of ideas about human sexual diversity and masculine/feminine and alternative gendered identities.

### **1.2. Development of A Gender-Focused Anthropology: A Brief History**

Anthropology as a new science, was the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries humanist response to the contrasting values about building a new world based on human worth (rather than birth-rights) and the redistribution of the newly acquired wealth from the far corners of the world towards more equality in social strata. Early anthropology began to publically question the validity and reliability of the historical accounts of the “savage” world by the European explorers. Armchair anthropologists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, nicknamed for they mostly did not travel to the non-Western societies of their time, brought to

question the systematic genocidal histories of the early modern political powers in the colonies and the curiously named, “new world” – that is the “discovery” of the Americas from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, it was almost immediately evident that for anthropology, as the study of *Other*, face-to-face encounter with the “primitive” was essential. Thus, fieldwork and subsequently ethnography was born.

Yet, it was not just the figure of the “savage” that problematized the idealism of a harmonious new world for the humanists. Women, in particular women of sociopolitical clout, began to speak out against their exclusion from the decisions and debates in political economy across Europe and throughout the English-speaking world, from New Zealand to the Canadian shores. As new constitutional revolutions and independence movements mapped the political landscapes of nation-states in the world, the absence of women in the new imaginary and utopian life could no longer be ignored. As such, the growing internal crises across Europe and North America, wherein capitalism and colonial expansionism were on the rise so that “new money” from the colonies rapidly replaced the old aristocratic wealth and power, public debates were stirred up about equality between the sexes, and ideals about socioeconomic fairness fueled political movements across the cosmopolitan industrial centers. In other words, the world began to take a dramatic turn and women became central in this transformation.

### **1.3. Building The 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s Model Society: Gender and Difference**

From poverty, wars, and famine rose new flows of mass migrations away from Europe and across the oceans in search of a dream life wherein the individual’s hard honest labor could bring about a change to the tragic chasms between the destitute and the wealthy, between the hungry and the old aristocracy. After a century of instability and transformational industries, the idea of a Middle Class, supported by new occupations and the rapid urbanization of life across the industrialized world, swiftly became incorporated in the dominant cultures of the West. With it, the idea of a middle class lifestyle, brought about new values about home, family, and gendered division of labor. While men of the modern world were envisioned to take part in the new industries that generated them with a steady income, thus marking the men as breadwinners of their family, women were expected to care for the home and the family.

In this modern vision of managed life, division of labor between the sexes provided an efficient model perceived essential for a productive social system under capitalism. As heads of households, heterosexual men were to take pride in their waged work, which enabled their wives to stay home in order to run the house and to care for the children. Women, of the modernized world were to seek out stability in a married life, wherein as second in command, they would take charge of raising the children as future workforce and citizens. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasis on individuality and modern educational system, coupled with the emergence of adolescence as a new social category, interlinked the anthropological examination of family with gender.

Against the prevailing views that social unrest of the 1920’s, from psychological and biological rhetorical cannon, emerged a groundbreaking ethnography that provided comparative cultural accounts of ideas about sex and personhood to suggest that importance of socialization rather than biological determinism. Chief among pioneering

anthropologists of sexuality and gender is Margaret Mead, whose half-a-century of public speaking and publications have withstood the test of times the world over, and forever forged a union between anthropological scholarship and the question of gender. Section 2 of this paper will focus on Mead's work and contribution to anthropology of gender and sexuality.

#### **1.4. Why the Merge Makes Sense**

An anthropological interrogation in to the questions of gender and sexuality offers a range of significance. As a branch of Social Sciences focusing on that which makes us human, anthropology complicates the meaning and the application of sexual differences among human communities beyond a mere outcome of biology. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropological fieldwork not only documented diversity of human cultural models of gendered life and sexual desires, they pioneered the controversial critique of normative Western ideologies about the oppositional status of men and women as essentially determined by birth, arguing instead for a culturally constructed perception of gender roles between the sexes and social attitudes about various sexual practices. From incest to polygamy, from adolescence sexual maturity to sex work, these early first-encounter accounts of that which was deemed taboo and forbidden in the modern Western society, sparked a challenge to the dominant view on sex and sexually determined gender roles, later articulated in the critique by Foucault as produced discourse on sexual normalcy during the Victorian era (1978). Both gender studies and anthropology reside at the center of a critique of power and discourse (as a form of power). Anthropology of gender, therefore, is an agreeable cross-disciplinary focus on how ideas about sex, sexuality, and gendered codes of conduct take form and are negotiated through the test of time and across diverse cultural geographies.

### **2. Ethnography: A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Invention**

Parallel developments from both sides of the pond, the British school of social anthropology exemplified in the work of Malinowski; and the American cultural anthropology pioneered by Boas radically raised the bar on anthropological examination of sex and gendered life. Never before had there been a sustainable effort for the inclusion of women in the forefront of practicing social sciences as achieved by Franz Boas. His commitment to fighting racism and sexism in academia and among the public sphere was never hidden or sidelined throughout his long illustrious career in the field: *"We [the European white men] have no right to look down upon them [the non-Europeans] ... for a person's worth should be judged by the warmth of his heart,"* (*Journals and Letters, 1998 [1883]*)

#### **2.1. Historical-Particularism Of Gender And Sexuality**

Beginning in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Boas established a new approach to social sciences committed in its fight against the growing ethnocentric Eugenics movement in Europe and in North America. Embracing human cultural diversity over "civilization" projects that were eradicating non-Western ways of life among indigenous peoples, "salvage anthropology" of Boasian era emerged from a debate over the dichotomous relationship between "nature" and "culture", wherein

human social development, commonly understood as a linearly progressive model through history from “primitive” societies to technologically modern, was privileged over others. Franz Boas and whole generation of American anthropologists trained by Boas (Kroeber, Mead, Benedict, etc.) valued direct observation from the field as a moral commitment to knowledge about diversity of human cultures, thus focusing on participant-observational fieldwork among isolated societies in order to preserve as much of the disappearing cultures as they could before the invasion of the “white man”.

## **2.2. Knowing sexuality through the “Native’s Point of View”**

Similar to Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski’s extensive writing on fieldwork stemmed from his attention to the importance of diversity and difference among human practices and ideas about life and self in “unfamiliar” cultures of the world. For Malinowski, ethnographical magic emerged from the focus on “here and now”; bridging the gap between “there and here”; the “known” and the “unknown”. Malinowski practiced and promoted a new methodology for doing anthropology by “pitching his tent among the natives” and through meticulous taking notes that later he would analyze under the rubric of a combined structural-functionalist approach to fieldwork (1922).

## **2.3. Cultural Construction Of Sex And Gender**

For Ruth Benedict, a notable student of Franz Boas, gender was rooted in the study of culture. In this vein, Benedict found an individual capable of altering the conditions of her own life, which would result in changing the conditions of her society. Her background interest in literature enabled her to read in culture not merely historical accounts of human diversity, but instead to seek out repeated themes on the significance of beliefs and values given to ideas. Femininity and sexuality, much like culture itself, was the product of human choice. In *Patterns of Culture*, Benedict focused on the diversity of marriage customs and rituals and significance of puberty and adolescence, as “social associations not biological,” (1934). Like her mentor, Benedict was dedicated to social causes and advocated for every person to follow her/his own path in life, even when going against the norms, when norms promoted racism and religious bigotry. Through her intimate friendships with Edward Sapir and Margaret Mead, two of the other prominent anthropologists of her cohort, also trained by Boas, Benedict found encouragement to further establish her professional life. Despite her shyness, Ruth Benedict stood out as a female academic and as a lesbian, at the time that neither were common practice (Banner 2003).

## **2.4. Mead: Half A Century Of Anthropological Writing On Sex And Gender**

A prodigy of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead despite her young age, successfully agitated the dominant discourse on youth and sexuality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning with her pioneering fieldwork in Samoa (1928), Mead’s controversial writings and outspoken critique of Western normative approach to women and sex opened up the public debate for several generations of American women and men. Taking up with the Boasian perspective on the Nature versus Culture debate, Mead prophetically argued against the notion of biological determinism in human sexuality, citing ethnographic data to support the culturally constructed view of sexuality and gender of her time. Mead quickly

became a renowned figure of wisdom, picking up to public appearances wearing a cape and carrying a staff during the counter culture revolution of the 1960's, where a whole generation of disenchanted youth rejected the status quo and opted for "making love, not war" slogan. Margaret Mead's prolific career as a pioneering female anthropologist, a popular author, and a relatable public speaker secured her a permanent place in history and marked her portrait on the United States postal stamp.

### 3. The Cold War and Second-Wave Feminism

The 1950's marked the dawn of a new era. From the ashes of two back-to-back wars burning out of Europe with devastating results across the globe, rose new debates about the condition of humanity in the face of mass-killing technologies and fast-rising competitive powers. Amidst the ideological and moral fervor, once again, the human subject took center stage. What makes us who we are, and how to safeguard against extreme devastating human actions such that the world experienced in holocaust and the dropping of the atom bomb took precedence in the discourse of building yet a newer world. Fueled by popular concerns over the protection against enslavement of people and prohibition of genocide, anthropologist and feminists alike found themselves at the foreground of the debate over ideas of liberty equality, and justice. The ideologically divided world in the aftermath of the WWII, suitably called the Cold War era, the race to domination of the globe between the socialist and the "free" world could not escape the question of social and economic inequality between sexes. The Second Wave Feminism that peaked in the 1970's across North America and Western Europe grew in conjunction with socioeconomic justice movements that demanded equality and freedom for all. The counter culture and the civil rights movements in the United States during the 1950's and 1960's helped generate the discourse of emancipation and liberty between the sexes. Ethnographic accounts from non-Western cultures of the world provided further material evidence for the critique of social norms about gender and sex, thus, further forging a union between anthropology and feminist scholarship and politics.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Sholeh Shahrokhi** received her Ph.D. in 2008 from University of California at Berkeley in Anthropology. In the same year she resumed a teaching post at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana in United States, where she continues to teach in the Department of History and Anthropology and across interdisciplinary programs such as Gender Women and Sexuality Studies, Peace Studies, International Studies, and Global and Historical Studies. Her research projects in Iran, France, UK, and the United States have focused on the formation of gendered norms, politics and ideas about sexuality. Her writing on Iran aims to diversify representation of the people, while remaining critical of strategies for inclusion / exclusion of "others". She has conducted research on Europe's refugee "crisis" (2016-17); Iranian diaspora, as *the other Muslims* in the United States (2014-2015); Body and political protest in the post-election Green Movement Iran (2009-2014); Art in Islamic cultures (2012-2013); Sexuality and power in Iranian cinema (2012); Gender in graphic novels reflecting political change in the Middle East (2011); Body politics in street protest (2009-2010); Cosmetic surgery and shifting ideals of masculinity, femininity and beauty (2005-2009); Spatial claims, border-crossing among *runaway daughters* in Tehran (2000-2005); Alternative lifestyles among young Iranians in the US (1994).

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