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NATURE AND GENDER: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Women's studies and feminist politics have caused academics, among many others, to reconsider their views on questions of nature and gender. My aim here is to add a further dimension to such reflections and to look at the concepts nature and gender from an anthropological point of view. Among other things, this perspective has some moral and intellectual relevance for our understanding of feminism generally and the role of gender studies in our study of religion in particular.

As the current President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Jean La Fontaine, has recently said,

"Most anthropologists would agree that the study of social anthropology can be an antidote to prejudice. [It is fundamental to the subject] to learn to approach all social arrangements as equally valid ways of organizing communal life, and all customs are equally interesting . . . Comparison also calls into question the cultural certainties with which all societies equip their members. The comparative perspective puts one's society and its customary practices in a different light. Social anthropology, it is said, makes it possible to 'see ourselves as others see us'" (1986: 3).

In this light it is perhaps appropriate to consider briefly the meaning and use of the concept "nature" in our society, not least because many of our ideas about sex, as a physical distinction, and gender, as a social and cultural distinction, depend on our prior definition of "nature".

How natural is our concept of "nature"?

As David Pocock points out in his introductory anthropology textbook, it is a commonplace among social anthropologists that when people in our society speak about something as "natural", they are almost certainly being highly ethnocentric and making a statement of belief which cannot be tested empirically: "when a social anthropologist hears . . . the phrase, 'it's only natural' – that people should act, think or feel in a certain way – he will be much more disposed to question this alleged 'naturalness' than someone who accepts it as an irrefutable proof" (1975: viii).

Moreover, he suggests that we do not have to think very hard to see how much damage has been done through the abuse of the concepts "nature" and "natural". We are well aware how the idea of "race" as a "natural" category was used to justify Nazi efforts to "purify the blood" and how it continues to be used as the cornerstone of the South African defence of apartheid. We have become sensitive to the dogma of "nature" in such cases, but we are much less sensitive to the tyranny of the idea of what is "natural" when we speak of gender. Just think of how often our stereotypes of male and female are made to sound plausible by using the concept "nature" to lend them weight and authority. We have all heard, and probably ourselves used, phrases like:

"women are natural mothers", "it's just like a man", "a woman's instinct", "boys just are more energetic than girls" and so on.

In such cases, what we regard as "natural" is in fact a cultural construct, a concept which relates not to some objective, or ultimate reality, but to our own society's way of dividing up and classifying experience. And, of course, one of the things which gives our notion of what is "natural" such clout, is its close association with our ideas about science as a highly-rated way of coping with the "natural world".

Nature, science and religion in Western thought

For us "science" implies a rigorous methodology and universal, comprehensive goals, and we accord it considerable authority, *not least* because "science" is our prime means of understanding and controlling "nature". In saying that, I have just produced a perfect example of the circularity of our concepts of science and nature. On the one hand, science is our prime means of understanding the natural world; on the other, "the natural world" is defined as those areas of experience that we can explore and control scientifically. The authority of both concepts is mutually reinforcing and the statements we make about "human nature" or the "nature of women and men" are that much more compelling and persuasive.

Our notions of "nature" and "science" are not really separate at all, but inextricably combined. And, of course, this association has a long history. As MacCormack has written in the introduction to the book *Nature, Culture and Gender*, "Our European ideas about nature and culture are fundamentally about our origins and evolution . . . Genesis, for example, sets humans in opposition to nature and promises us domination over nature. With Protestantism, we come to take individual responsibility for the rational understanding and harnessing of nature." Today, our ideas of dominating nature reflect "the faith of industrial society that society is produced by enterprising activity". Indeed, it has even been suggested that "'development' from a Hobbesian state of nature is the origin myth of Western capitalism" (1980: 6). She continues,

"we allocate honour and prestige to people of science and industry who excel in understanding and controlling the powerful domain of nature. We also honour people who overcome animal urges, curbing these urges in accordance with moral codes. When women are defined as 'natural' a high prestige or even moral 'goodness' is attached to men's domination over women, analogous to the goodness of human domination of natural energy sources or the libidinal energy of individuals" (1980: 6).

In this light, the myths of primitive matriarchy fashionable with both Victorians and ourselves are perhaps explicable: myths of the rule of women offer a vision of a catastrophic alternative to contemporary social forms and a justification for male dominance.

And there are, of course, other important threads in the history of the notions of nature and culture in European thought. Block and Bloch have investigated what they have called the "dialectics of nature" in 18th century thought (1980). On the one hand, the changes and reforms which Rousseau sought were based on a

particular concept of human nature which was associated with a society based on notions of human rights and democratic forms. Here Rousseau's concept of nature was defined in terms of opposites, including a corrupted social hierarchy. However, Rousseau also set up a further dialectic between the idea of nature as a model for a new, purified society and nature as it was associated with female emotions and domestic roles. As McCormack says in her introduction to the Bloch's discussion, "18th-century ideas of social and political reform did not extend to women. Although they were more purely natural than men, women were socially defined as passive, dependent and politically inferior to men" (1980: 20-21). In this way nature meant both what is given and basic and is regarded as good, but also what is wild, savage and bad. Our present use of the concept "nature" contains this same ambiguity.

The development of the concepts "nature" and "culture" have a critical place in the development of European thought, and parallel the development of a dichotomy between concepts of "reason" and "faith", and the basic opposition we readily accept today between ideas of what is "secular" and what is "sacred". Pocock considers how such often taken-for-granted concepts qualify our understanding of "religion" both in our own society and cross-culturally. He also reminds us that Durkheim pointed out in his classic work, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that people cannot develop a notion of the "supernatural" unless they have developed a prior notion of what is "natural" (1975: 155).

In a very complicated fashion our view of human history, culture, rationality and civilization depend on an idea of the domination of nature and such domination has been increasingly associated in European thought with the assertion of masculine ways over "irrational", "backward-looking" women.

Perhaps I have laboured my point unduly, but it is important to realize that in everyday life when we talk about the roles of women and men in our society, or the "nature" of male or female gender, the sense and impact of what we say derives from both the double-barrelled authority of science and religion and from the very circularity of our ideas of nature.

Assumptions about "nature" and "culture"

It is always hard to identify the assumptions we make to order and give meaning to our lives, and it is harder still to question and perhaps challenge the whole social and intellectual edifice which depends on those assumptions.

A good example of just how hard such an exercise is can be drawn from the recent history of anthropology itself. In the last two decades the structuralism of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has had a considerable impact on how we have viewed nature and culture and gender relations of all kinds. Structural analyses rest on an insistence that cultural classifications are always based on paired oppositions, and that by considering all the cultural items associated with a particular context, we may reveal patterns which are more than superficial. Clearly, the same principle should operate when we consider notions of gender: the way we

define women and what is feminine depends on the way we define men and masculinity, and vice versa.

Following Lévi-Strauss, a series of paired oppositions was explored: between women, the domestic group and the natural environment on the one hand, and men, the world of public and political affairs, and culture on the other. A basic association of women with nature and men with culture, was, for a while, very influential. Thus Ortner, an excellent theorist writing in the early days of gender studies in anthropology, could herself use the idea of what is "natural" in exactly the way I've tried to warn against doing.

In *Women, Culture and Society*, Ortner wrote that "everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men" (1974: 69). But, as McCormack has pointed out (1980: 17), what Ortner didn't say was – By whom they are considered so: by men? women? by how many? In making such an assertion, Ortner (like Lévi-Strauss) took for granted an assumption from our own culture: that polarities between nature and culture and between men and women were basic to the way in which all human beings think. She also assumed, in the tradition of evolutionary thinking in our society, that there were simple hierarchical scales on which men and women could be ranged.

Ortner went on: "It all begins of course with the body and the natural procreative functions *specific to women alone*. And she maintained explicitly that the cultural concepts by which societies (and, by implication all societies) characterise women are determined by the facts of female physiology." (La Fontaine 1981: 334).

So very recently indeed we have a respected anthropologist, among many others, arguing that aspects of human biology, such as women's lactation or men's greater physical strength, are the prime determinants of gender classifications and that the cultural elaborations of these differences provide society's justification of male domination of women.

At this juncture, we need to remind ourselves of two separate but related points. First, that the division of women's and men's labour into domestic and public spheres is universal but the way the division is managed is determined by culture rather than biology. Indeed virtually all human behaviour, including even such "physical" activities as copulation and childbirth is learned behaviour. Such activities vary widely between different societies, while actual patterns of female and male behaviour accord with each society's beliefs about the reproductive functions of the sexes. This leads directly on to the second point, that the term "biology" itself requires examination, and we need to be quite clear about the objective role of human anatomy and physiology in our understanding of gender.

Biology and gender

Human anatomy is indeed used as the basis for classifying women and men, but the categories "women" and "men" per se are *not biological or anatomical at all*, but *cultural*. That is, anatomical differences between women and men are universal, and all societies

recognize them, but they use them to construct social ideas. In other words, what it is to be a “woman” – “women’s nature”, if you will, as gentle or emotional (to take stereotypes of our own society) – depends on a series of cultural definitions which are specific to a particular society at a particular time. And, again, what makes the cultural categories so convincing is the way they form part of a circular system: the particular attributes, of gentleness or the emotionality of women for instance, are deemed intrinsic by association with the anatomical features (the womb, the breasts, for example) which are actually represented as their cause (cf. La Fontaine 1981: 335).

Thus, the capacity to lactate is used to define womanhood, and the woman who nurses her infant is associated with a nurturing role which is itself associated with patience and gentleness thus leading to the self-fulfilling prophecy that the ideal woman is one who is a patient and gentle mother. A striking feature of such an ideological construct is that it places enormous emphasis on the exclusive role of the biological mother in nurturing children and this, in turn, is closely linked with the identification of women’s place in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers.

However, it takes very little comparative study to see that these associations are culturally determined. For instance, the history of the “domestication” of women in our society, as it has been called, has been carefully examined by Rodgers (1980). It is the result of a process which has been traced back to the 11th century in Europe and, more importantly, to the industrial revolution; in the process of “domestication” women lost their economic autonomy as producers in their own right – as farmers, craft workers or traders – and became increasingly dependent on the wages of men and more confined to the home and house work.

Moreover, we are aware that the biologizing of gender has created stereotypes which are contradicted by actual practices. For instance, institutions of wet-nursing, artificial feeding and nannies, free mothers from any permanent association with their offspring after birth, while others, such as celibacy or contraception, actually preclude any necessary association between motherhood and womanhood at all.

Equally we are aware that in our society, as in others, gender stereotypes contain contradictions: images of mothers suggest they are gentle but wise, yet also liable to be irrationally domineering and weaker in both a physical and moral sense than a child’s father. Gender concepts, and the symbols and metaphors on which they are based, have many varied implicit meanings; they and their associated stereotypes are constantly used in different ways to validate or justify a whole variety of contemporary social forms.

Before I attempt to develop this point further, let us return for a moment to the question of biology.

We are all aware of the way features of human anatomy are treated differently in different societies and in our own society over time. To see this, we have only to compare the fascination many peoples have with women’s buttocks, with our own Page 3 kind of

fascination with women’s breasts. Or, we can look at the history of the artistic conventions in the portrayal of the female nude in European art and compare this with the treatment of human nakedness in non-European traditions, in the art of India, Africa or Japan. Or, consider how in many traditions the phallus is often symbolically associated with spears, arrows and other weapons, so that, as La Fontaine points out, “death-dealing activities appear to have a double appropriateness for men, being justified by the greater strength of male bodies and associated symbolically with the anatomical feature which defines masculinity” (1981: 335). Yet such associations are neither universal nor unchanging, otherwise I dare say codpieces would still be in fashion today!

Equally, if we consider sexuality *per se*, we find that, quite contrary to the Freudian view that all humans have an innate high level of sexual energy which must be expressed directly or indirectly, levels of sexual energy are themselves determined by cultural and social circumstances. Thus, in contrast with our own cultural preoccupation with sexuality, the society of the Dani of Indonesia is noteworthy for its extremely low level of sexual interest and activity. Especially striking is their rule of a five-year sexual abstinence after a birth, which is uniformly observed by both a wife and her husband and is not the subject of great concern or stress. This low level of sexuality appears to be a purely cultural phenomenon, not caused by any biological factors, but consistent with other aspects of Dani social organization and structure (Heider 1976).

Even from such brief examples, it is clear that the universal “facts” of human anatomy and sexuality are variably treated in different cultural contexts. And there is even more variation in the interpretation of human physiology, though it too is “objectively” universal. The physiology of each sex and the processes of human reproduction are also the subject of social constructions.

The question of virgin birth

For anthropologists the classic example of this fact is the variety of notions of paternity and virgin birth found in different societies. In some societies it is women, in others men, who are credited with primary reproductive powers. In this respect, the late Audrey Richards recorded the pithy observation of a Ngoni man of Central Africa who was commenting on the views of the neighbouring Bemba people who, unlike the Ngoni, were organized in according to ideas of matrilineal descent: “If I have a bag and put money in it, the money belongs to me. But the Bemba say that a man puts semen into a woman and yet the children belong to the woman, not the man” (quoted in La Fontaine 1981: 336).

Such social constructions depend on which elements of the reproductive process a people choose to emphasize – perhaps the act of ejaculation, or alternatively the lengthy pregnancy, or childbirth itself, or even the process of socialization. Whichever emphasis we find, it also entails an elaboration of notions of gender, of what it means to be male or female, in a particular society.

For instance, as I have already suggested, when we think about reproducing the next generation of adults in

our own society, we place great emphasis on the so-called biological role of the mother and her role in socializing children and very little emphasis on either the father's procreative or parental role. If this were not the case, we would be hard-put to explain why, after a divorce, women almost always gain custody of the children of the marriage. Elsewhere, as among some groups of Australian Aborigines and among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, there is such a selective emphasis on pregnancy and parturition that these people have even been said to be ignorant of physiological paternity.

Nowadays anthropologists, following Sir Edmund Leach's discussion of virgin birth, would accept that such peoples were not ignorant of the male role in conception, but rather they simply deemed it irrelevant to their explanations of the mystery of creation. That is, "doctrines about the possibility of conception taking place without male insemination do not stem from innocence and ignorance: on the contrary they are consistent with the theological argument of the greatest subtlety" (Leach 1969: 84-5). Leach suggests that "If we put the so-called primitive beliefs alongside the sophisticated ones and treat the whole lot with equal philosophical respect we shall see that they constitute a set of variations around a common problem, the metaphysical relationship between people and their gods" (p. 85).

As he explains, using the comparable Christian example, the idea of the "Virgin Birth does *not* imply ignorance of the facts of physiological paternity. On the contrary, it serves to reinforce the dogma that the Virgin's child is the son of God. Furthermore, the Christian doctrine of the physical-spiritual paternity of God the Father does not preclude a belief in the sociological paternity of St Joseph . . . The authors of the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke combine their account of the Virgin Birth with a pedigree which places Jesus in the direct line of patrilineal descent from David *through Joseph*" (1969: 95-6); "a careful distinction is made between Jesus' legal status *as a man* and his essential nature *as a god*" (p. 97).

However, the same "distinction between legal status and substance appears also in the matrilineal Trobriand case in the reverse sense" (p. 96; cf. 106ff.). The impregnating ancestral spirits are members of the mother's lineage and the child's legal status derives from its mother's brother; the woman's husband (who alone has sexual access to his wife) is held to be neither *genitor* nor *pater* of the child, yet he is nonetheless understood to be the source of the child's physical substance and physiognomy. Clearly, whether we are considering Trobriand procreation beliefs or Christians who say they believe in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, we can see that they are expressing a religious truth which does not relate to other everyday experience, except by contrast.

To take the example a bit further, Leach points out that anthropological efforts to make sense of the social implications of an idea like virgin birth require that the idea be treated alongside other ideas about supernatural births which one finds in a particular system of beliefs. In the Christian case, for example, one would want to consider the similarities and differences between the birth

of Christ and the birth of Isaac which is also contrary to our experience since, after all, Isaac's mother, Sarah, was granted a child in her old age (1969: 98).

Notions of gender and procreation

The range of stories of miraculous births and other beliefs about procreation establish the parameters of fundamental social concepts like paternity or motherhood in any particular tradition. In a recent article which continues the anthropological debate about virgin birth, Delaney (1986) has suggested that in communities whose systems of religious beliefs and practices derive from the Semitic religious traditions, we find that paternity means begetting – that is, it has a primary, creative role. By contrast, maternity in such traditions is not an equivalent concept and does not relate to a creative potential in women but is consistently associated with nurturing and bearing. This difference is of course made explicit in Christianity and exemplified in the doctrine of Virgin Birth.

Delaney develops what she calls a monogenetic theory of procreation – that is, one in which the child is held to originate from one source only. She suggests that such a theory is consistent with theological concepts of monotheism in which God is the ultimate and only source of all creation. The corollary, of course, is that in so-called polytheistic systems of belief, in which ideas of human and divine creativity are not so single-minded but diverse and manifold, we might expect, as indeed is the case, that theories of procreation are also more complex and do not ascribe priority to a single creative source.

I have already mentioned that in all social systems, physical attributes take on moral qualities. As Leach remarked, the Christian idea of Virgin Birth is compatible with patriarchy. Delaney elaborates this idea and notes that, in the cultural milieu associated with the Semitic religions, men are regarded as having a creative power within them which is related to ideas of their autonomy, self-sufficiency, authority and their ability to lead and innovate. Women, by contrast, are understood to lack this power to create and to project and perpetuate themselves in their own right. And, by the same token, they are held to be more emotional and less direct than men. In other words, women receive men's seed, and they are also the passive receivers of cultural forms initiated by men.

Clearly the symbols and beliefs associated with ideas of procreation may provide the basic concepts and metaphors in terms of which ideas of the person, both male and female, are constructed and relations between them and with the non-human world are articulated. In this respect, it is of considerable interest that scientific data that women provide not only nutritive material but half the genetic constitution of a child have only been widely assimilated in the West in the past few decades. Clearly, as Delaney suggests, such new knowledge is bound to affect our ideas of gender, but, because of the association of the old ideas with many of the most important themes of Western culture, this process of change is likely to be very slow and, in everyday life, we continue to associate men with a creative potential which we implicitly deny women.

The social context of gender constructs

An anthropological treatment of an idea like virgin birth depends on understanding both a range of procreation beliefs and the wider social contexts in which the idea developed and is used. Warner's fascinating and anthropologically-informed book on the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary (1976) provides a good example of the breadth of the issues which should be considered, among them the respective social roles of men and women. For example, Warner discusses how the idea of Mary, as a model for all women, has changed over time. Different emphases were associated historically with particular social dilemmas which confronted the Roman Catholic church: thus, the idea of the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven developed in the early Middle Ages during the period when powerful monarchs were emerging in western Europe, while the later emphasis on Mary Madonna – the sweet, submissive “domesticated” woman – was associated both with changes in inheritance law which served to deprive women of the previous rights they had to own and control property and particularly land, and also with the development and spread of monastic institutions which served to deny women an active and independent role in the church ministry.

In the same vein, in my own work on Islam in contemporary Turkey, I have become interested in the transcendental role allocated to Emine, the mother of the Prophet Muhammad, in certain key ritual performances known as *mevlud* (Tapper & Tapper 1987). In these *mevlud* services, the Prophet's birth is treated as parthogenesis – as more or less a virgin birth, in spite of the importance, in Islamic theology, of Muhammad's human identity, his historical association with a particular tribal lineage and the routinization of charisma in his lineal descendants. But, in the *mevlud*, Muhammad's miraculous birth implicitly affords him a superhuman status which gives an additional force and plausibility to his prophetic message. The women's *mevlud* recitals differ from those of men in a number of specific details (for example, in the way women identify with the Prophet's mother and exalt childbirth and motherhood); for various reasons associated with recent changes in Turkish Islam, the women's recitals have become particularly important and women have, perhaps by default, assumed a primary role in expressing the religious truth of the salvation promise.

So far I have focused on conceptual systems, we should remember that not only particular beliefs, but also emotions and even physical reactions, can be influenced by cultural standards. There are many examples one could mention: particularly vivid is Christian's discussion of provoked religious weeping in later medieval Europe (1982). In that period controlled religious weeping was treated as clear evidence of heartfelt feeling and deeply held faith. The prayer manuals of the time instructed believers in such an expression of faith and both men and women learned to weep. Nowadays such displays of emotion are out of favour except in some Protestant sects, and to most of us it is inconceivable that sincerity or intensity of belief of women, let alone men, should be judged by such a criterion.

Gender, the self and the person

This brings me to my final point. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* traces the development of a discourse on sexuality in Western Europe and its relation to the near total control of the individual by the modern state. As an observer trying to stand outside his own society, Foucault's perspective allows him to say that “Sexuality [and thus of course the gender constructs associated with it] must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which must be managed by society”, but rather it is “an historical construct whose development can be documented” (1981: 105). His argument is complex and intriguing and it runs counter to many contemporary ideas about individualism and personal freedom which we both cherish and treat as axiomatic.

Other studies, like that of Dreitzel, draw on Foucault's ideas to show that in general in Western Europe we have moved, since the Middle Ages, towards an ever greater control of our emotions and physical behaviour from that which was immediate and spontaneous to that which is very formal and hedged round with etiquette. In this light Dreitzel looks at contemporary attitudes to emotions and bodily functions and tries to make connections “between such apparently different phenomena as the deritualization of everyday life, the changed attitudes towards nudity and sexuality, the ecological movements, the new emphasis on the political meaning of (so-called) “natural” categories such as race and region or gender and sex, the spread of experiential therapies, . . . the search for authentic experience” (1981: 221). He suggests that the common denominator of these diverse phenomena is a reflective and reflexive attitude towards our corporality and our environment.

Dreitzel argues that the emerging new attitude of self-reflectivity and reflexivity is a further elaboration of contemporary interest in the self and the person. And he suggests that we treat ourselves and our experiences as the only legitimate source of material for understanding the world. Self-discovery has become an obsession in our culture. The anthropologists Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) have developed a comparable theme: that in the West the individual has been given a transcendental value and there is an ideological stress on our unique and unrepeatable biographies. The individual is conceived of in opposition to society, and, for instance, traditional management of concepts associated with fertility and the reproduction of society have lost their importance.

This combination, of the self-consciousness of our own culture about “culture” as opposed to “nature” and a self-consciousness about the category “woman” as opposed to “man” may account for the prominence of the feminist movement and gender studies in the late 20th century. But whatever the case, it would behove us to ask – Why are we asking questions about gender or feminism today? And how do these questions relate to the kind of society in which we live?

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